

An Invitation to Wonder

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Third Presbyterian Church

June 17, 2018, Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 4:26-34

I was very late planting flowers this year - I didn't get around to it until last Sunday. In the back of our house, there are four or five pots that had been sitting outside all winter long. In them were last year's dirt and this year's weeds.

Except for one, which has my chives. I love chives - not only for their culinary uses, but because I don't need to do anything with them. They just grow. Whether I water them or not, they grow. Whether they're in a lot of sun or only a little bit, they grow. Whether I pull the weeds out or not, they grow. If I cut them to use in recipes, they grow back. Whether I bring the pot into the garage over the winter or not, the next spring, they just keep growing.

As my planting buddy, Mary Ann, and I were getting ready to plant a few things, she pointed to the pot right next to my chives and said, "Doesn't that look like chives?!" Sure enough, some seed had jumped into another pot, on its own, and started growing.

Something similar happened back when we lived in Buffalo, BTC - that's Before Third Church. Except in that case, the chives appeared a good 15 feet away, with an expanse of patio pavers in between. Not only do I not have to tend them, they will spread despite my best efforts to contain them in a single pot!

In the two parables Jesus told today, he said the kingdom of God is like that - a scattered seed takes root and grows in ways we do not know. It's inevitable in the ecosystem of God. How big it gets and how far it spreads is out of our control. It's a little scary for those of us who are planners and control freaks.

We might prefer the other parable about sowing seeds - the one that Jesus told earlier in Mark's fourth chapter - where it seems we can have a little more say-so in the outcome. Most of those seeds didn't do well at all, depending on the soil where they landed: birds ate the ones that fell on the path; those that fell on rocky ground grew roots that were too shallow, and died. Those that fell among thorns were choked out. Only the seeds that fell on to good soil thrived.

That parable suggests our response to Jesus' call does matter - a lot, in fact. In our faith tradition, we seek to read the whole Bible, and interpret one passage in the context of everything else in Scripture, especially in light of Jesus' life and witness. We do that rather than selectively picking out verses to justify say - an unjust action against vulnerable populations, such as migrant children.

How we respond makes a difference in God's ecosystem. At the same time, today's parables counterbalance that in a hopeful way - God is at work and sovereign no matter what. Growing in mysterious and even wondrous ways is the essence of God's reign.

It's not just up to us, and it's not even mostly about us. That's good news for us when the demands of discipleship have worn us down, or when we've fallen short in our response, or when the world's state of affairs feels uncertain and foreboding.

One of the joys I experience in this ministry is seeing these parables come to life. The seeds are varied - sometimes a seed of discontent with what is; or a seed of hope for what could be; or a seed of compassion for someone in need, or a seed of an untried idea.

So imagine the kingdom of God looking like this story that Third Church tutoring coordinator Deb Bishop gave me permission to share:

The kingdom of God is as if one of our congregation, Jenn Poggi, mentions to a member of her Saturday morning running group that she tutors at School #3. That person happens to be Monroe County Under Sheriff Korey Brown. Her comment reawakens in him memories of his own tutor experience in the city schools.

It grows into an idea - to give his staff members at the county jail the chance to give back to the community during their work hours, in hopes of shining light into their often dark and stressful days. Deb meets with him and other jail staff, and talks with teachers at the school. They all see the potential in this, so Deb begins coordinating schedules.

In March different departments within the jail adopt eight classrooms, giving deputies an hour a week in a classroom helping with lessons, reading to children, and getting to know them. It's a huge success - students love having them in their classrooms, and harbor dreams of one day becoming an officer. Now the Sheriff's Department is already thinking of ways to increase the numbers of law enforcement officers involved during the next school year.

The county jail superintendent tells Deb and the principal, "I know you all feel that we're doing School #3 a service, but the truth is, our Deputies are the ones being served."

The kingdom of God is like that.

With what else can we compare the kingdom of God? It is like a conversation in New Orleans, over dinner, during our final post-Katrina work trip.

Nancy Watson articulates her passion for creating warm, hospitable, and beautiful spaces for people who have experienced trauma or hardship. Months later, we receive an email from our partners at RAIHN, the Rochester Interfaith Hospitality Network, inviting congregations to sponsor a room at their new Day Center for homeless families. That would mean furnishing it to meet the needs of five families at a time sharing the single space.

Well, I remember our conversation in New Orleans a few months earlier. I simply forward Nancy the email, and saying I wonder if something like this would be of interest to her. That's all it takes. Before I know it, she's assembled a team to work on it - people like Ginnie Bacheler, and Carol Jones, and Laurie Mahoney, and the Melechs, and others I may have neglected to mention. And the funding appeal goes out to members of the congregation. People respond generously.

Although the planning team has many of their own creative ideas, they also spend many hours listening to the staff and families at RAIHN to learn what they really require - and change their plans to serve them. They furnish it; they are redoing the kitchen so that five parents can work side by side. The team creates a functional, long-lasting, and welcoming temporary home for

vulnerable families in transition - not unlike the large branches of Jesus' parable where birds can make their nest in the shade.

The kingdom of God is like that.

It's also like a coffee conversation while working on anti-gun violence issues. David Tennant and Dale Maddock sit down with police officer Moses Robinson. They discover shared concerns about the impact of violence, and in the process, Moses shares his vision of an urban campout for urban youth.

The seed he plants begins to grow into a Field of Dreams. The threesome approach the Rochester Red Wings baseball team. Could it happen at Frontier Field? Yes. Could they offer the opportunity to boys from School 17? Yes.

Over the course of 18 months, they forge other partnerships: churches (including Third Church) say, "we can provide funds and personnel." The Rochester Police Department says, "We can bring horses from the Mounted Patrol unit." Wegmans says, "We can provide breakfast." The city school district says, "we can provide transportation and chaperones." The National Guard says, "We can provide tents and sleeping bags."

The boys experience a fun opportunity they would never have imagined— a baseball game, good food, fireworks, a movie "Field of Dreams" on the Jumbotron screen, and a campout within the stadium. Community forms, barriers break down, at least for an overnight. And like my chives or any good perennial that grows back year after year, so does Field of Dreams again in year 2, and 3, and now 4 - albeit with a little more effort.

The kingdom of God is like that, too - 30 middle school boys camping out in the middle of a baseball field. Which, when you think about all of the unique and puzzling ways middle school boys can act, is itself a pretty humorous vision of God's reign.

Matt Skinner says humor and absurdity are part of the main point of Jesus' own parables. If Jesus wanted to equate God's in-breaking reign with something impressive, he could have used the tall, majestic cedars of Lebanon, as did the prophet Ezekiel. But he didn't.

"Instead he describes something more ordinary, and yet also something more able to show up, to take over inch by inch, and eventually to transform a whole landscape...to upend a society's ways of enforcing stability and relegating everyone to their "proper" places. [It] will mess with established boundaries and conventional values. Like a fast-replicating plant, it will get into everything. It will bring life and color to desolate places. It will crowd out other concerns. It will resist our manipulations. Its humble appearance will expose and mock pride and pretentiousness like a good burlesque show."¹

The parables of Jesus and even of today tell us that even in places of barrenness and brokenness, God is at work. In places of inequality and inequity, God is at work. In places of hurt and despair, God is already at work.

Do we have eyes to see? Do we have ears to hear? Do we have imaginations to wonder?

¹ Matthew Skinner, *Workingpreacher.org*, June 17, 2018.

And if we do, do we have the courage to find our place in these parables that Andrew King has reflected on with this poem:

*The sower has pared
her hope down to tiny seed.
Is it able to grow?
she wonders:
Is there arable soil? Rain enough?
The seed itself is so small.
Small as a drop of joy in a field of despair.
Small as a gesture of love in a hostile plain.
At night the sower dreams of
a flowering shrub.
Sheltering there are birds
of every kind.
Their songs have
wings, wings
the colours of rainbows.
She wakes to find the shrub begun,
life beginning to blossom.
And as the days
roll into weeks and months
the shrub grows green and strong.
The sheltering birds
lift up their songs
and the dream seems
brought to fruition.
But the rains dry up
and a harsh wind blows;
the green begins to fade,
and boughs of the shrub
are broken.
The sower's heart
is stricken
for the life-giving plant.
But see – within the surviving branches,
upon the battered boughs,
new seeds of life
still form.
Singing songs with wings
the colours of rainbows
the sower gathers the precious fruit.
And the sower again
continues to sow
the small brilliant seed
of hope.²*

² Andrew King, *A Poetic Kind of Place*, <https://earth2earth.wordpress.com/2015/06/>

Friends, the kingdom of God is like that. See the parables come to life in your midst. They're already there, waiting to be discovered, to be rewritten, and to be told anew. Amen.