

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
September 9, 2018

Church Planting

Mark 4:26-29

We're just a week away from celebrating our church's 60th anniversary. As I browsed through the papers in my Anniversary Committee file earlier this week, I came across the chronological list of our congregation's pastors, from the first one, Eugene Brotherton, all the way up to myself, and all those in between. No two of us have been exactly alike. We've each been unique, with particular gifts and goals, particular strengths and weaknesses. But we've all had much in common too. In particular, we've all sought to be faithful preachers of God's life-giving word. And we've all tried to do so by relying on the power of God to bring about the results.

This means that each pastor of Grace Baptist Church has been a "church planter." Not in the strict sense of someone whose mission focuses on starting new congregations, but in the sense of someone who sows the seed of God's word and looks to God for the fruitfulness of what has been planted. Though each pastor has brought certain skills, experience, and training to this ministry, in the end, we've all been dependent, especially in our preaching, on the life that only God can give. As Paul Duke has said of us pastors: "We may think of ourselves as religious professionals, but we're just people throwing seed."¹

I'm here this morning to throw some more seed. In fact, one of the reasons that I'm able to sow some seed is because of the other seed sowers who've come before me. That includes not only the pastors who've stood at this pulpit, but all the people who've been part of the life and mission of our church across six decades. As we approach our anniversary, let's remember that many, many people have worked, prayed, served, and sacrificed, in the name of Jesus Christ, to shape our congregation into what it is today. We're still benefiting from the harvest of their labor for the Lord.

"This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground" (v. 26). That's the way Jesus begins today's text from Mark. It only takes Jesus four verses to narrate this episode. In no time at all, the man in the story has gone from sowing to harvesting. It's like one of those time lapse videos of a seed buried in the dirt, and in a matter of about 30 seconds it cracks open, breaks through the soil, and stretches upward to become a full-grown plant. That's about how long it takes Jesus to tell this parable.

Maybe the parable is like the seed itself—small but potent. It doesn't take up much space, but it's capable of great things. That's certainly where Jesus puts the accent. The way Jesus tells the story, the man steps onto the stage, does his part, and then quickly disappears. The spotlight now shifts to the seed itself. That's because the seed has a life of its own. At this point, it doesn't really matter whether the man who scattered the seed is sound asleep or up and about, the seed is doing its thing. Whether the sun is shining or the stars are out, the fact remains that way down there in the fertility of the earth, there's something underway.

Jesus says that's what God's reign is like. The way that the kingdom of God operates and grows is often hidden and mysterious. But one thing is crystal clear, namely, that the kingdom isn't the result of human efforts. Notice that in the parable, the man who scatters

the seed doesn't know how it sprouts and grows. He can't fathom that process. It's beyond his comprehension, and certainly beyond his control.

Jesus says, "*All by itself* the soil produces grain." So the power and potential are in the seed, not in the sower. You see, this is a parable that warns against our thinking that we, in and of ourselves, can slowly and surely and patiently build the kingdom of God. That we, by our hard work and determination, can usher in the reign of God's righteousness. That we, with enough vision and cooperation, can make the world to come a reality here in the present world.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that we're called to be completely passive, to just sit back and wait for God to bring the harvest. There's still room for our part in the process. Somebody still needs to sow. Somebody still needs to weed and water. Somebody still needs to care for and cultivate. Somebody still needs to help reap the harvest. But there wouldn't even be a harvest to reap apart from the saving power present in Jesus. The salvation is of God. The power is of God. The whole process, from invisible beginnings to guaranteed harvest, is God's doing.

Though he wasn't a farmer, the apostle Paul did his share of seed sowing in the life of Christian congregations. He knew the true source of life, and reminded the believers in Corinth: "I planted the seed, Apollos watered , but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow" (1 Cor. 3:6-7). That's a humbling, and liberating, message for 60 years worth of pastors and parishioners. Humbling because it warns us against an inflated sense of self-importance, and liberating because it sets us free to do our part in God's work without thinking that it's up to us to usher in God's reign of righteousness.

One theologian once exhorted pastors this way:

I beg you, do not look upon [this parish] as a steppingstone, but rather say: Here I shall stay as long as it pleases God; if it be his will, until I die. Look upon every child, your confirmands, every member of the congregation as if you will have to give account for every soul on the day of the Lord Jesus. Every day commit all these human souls from the worst and the weakest of hands, namely, your own, into the best and strongest of hands. Then you will be able to carry on your ministry not only without care but also with joy overflowing and joyful hope.²

This is sound guidance not only for pastors but for everyone in the congregation. When we recognize our own weakness and the Lord's great strength, we're better able to minister with joy and hope, because we're relying on God's capacity rather than our own. God alone gives the growth, which is another way of saying that we believe in grace.

Grace Baptist Church. Grace. That's both our name and the source of our existence. In other words, this congregation is a gift of God, not something of our own doing. As one preacher has described it, we're simply caretakers of a miracle that we have no power to create.³ At this stage of things, this miracle called Grace Baptist Church is almost 60 years old. We're still growing into our name. Seed sown long ago is still producing. And we're still scattering new seed in our own day and time.

And with the scattering comes the waiting. In fact, a lot of who we are and what we do as a church is about sowing and waiting. We spend much of our time in between sowing and harvesting. So individually and together, we keep on scattering the seed of the gospel, in word and deed. We keep on worshiping and working and witnessing faithfully, trying our best to be obedient to the reign of Christ. We keep on putting forth the time and effort to cultivate the life and mission of our congregation. In all these ways, we're seed sowers.

Seed sowers who sometimes grow weary, and perhaps even from time to time wonder if it's all worth it, if the harvest will really come.

But we have the Lord's promise that what he has started he will complete. So as Paul says, "Let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart" (Gal. 6:9). Not losing heart often takes the form of continued sowing and tending. Author Eugene Peterson has written:

The person who looks for quick results in the seed planting of well-doing will be disappointed. If I want potatoes for dinner tomorrow, it will do me little good to plant them in my garden tonight. There are long stretches of darkness and invisibility and silence that separate planting and reaping. During the stretches of waiting, there is cultivating and weeding and nurturing and planting still other seeds.⁴

As we wait for the coming of Christ and the final harvest of God's kingdom, our waiting is an active, agricultural kind of life. Though most of you don't spend much time farming, you are "church planters." That is, you're followers of Jesus who throw seed into the world by proclaiming and practicing the ways of God's reign, trusting that there will come a time to reap.

Dr. Quinn: Medicine Woman is a television series about an early frontier doctor played by Jane Seymour. In one episode, her best friend, Dorothy, has breast cancer, and is worried that she might not have long to live. As Dorothy walks somberly among the townspeople, who are enjoying a picnic in a large clearing, a boy named Brian comes running up to her and says, "Hey, Miss Dorothy, look what I found. Acorns." Brian continues:

"Sully says if I plant one, it'll grow to be as big as that oak."

"None of us will live to see it get that big, Brian," says Miss Dorothy. "That oak is a hundred years old."

"Oh," Brian replies. Dejected, he puts the acorns in his pocket and walks back to his family, who are seated on a blanket. He tells his mother, Dr. Quinn, "Miss Dorothy says there's no use in planting it. She says none of us will get to see it grow that big."

Dr. Quinn takes an acorn from him and says, "Brian, you must plant it, because by next year it will have grown up to your knees. The year after that, it will be taller than you. When it's time to go courting, you can take your young lady for a picnic under it. Then, when you have children, they could build a tree-house in it. And some day you can tell your grandchildren about how you planted it. When that tree gets to be a hundred, it doesn't matter that you're not here to see it." She places the acorn back in his hand. "All that matters is today. Today, you hold a hundred years in your hand."⁵

I'm not sure if those who planted the seeds that became Grace Baptist Church realized that they had sixty years, and more, in their hands. Over these six decades, a lot of the good fruit of God's reign has come forth. And there's more to come. Some of the harvest will be short term and some will be long term. You and I may not even be here to see a lot of it. But we're still sent to scatter the seed of the gospel, here and now, trusting that God will give the growth, and his kingdom will come.

¹ Quoted in Michael P. Knowles, *Of Seeds and the People of God: Preaching as Parable, Crucifixion, and Testimony* (Eugene: Cascade, 2015) Kindle edition.

² Friedrich von Bodelschwingh, *Leadership* (Vol. 9, No. 4).

³ Knowles, *Of Seeds and the People of God*.

⁴ Eugene Peterson, *Leadership* (Vol. 8, No. 4).

⁵ *Dr. Quinn: Medicine Woman*, DVD Season 3, Vol. 3, "Ladies Night Part 2." Scene 5, "Sunday Picnic."