

## SOWING AND GROWING

Mark 4:26-34 [MW18-21]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 17 June 2018

Let me tell you something about "secrets" [Slide 2]

There's an old fable about the traveller going through the night, seeing up ahead of him in the dim, rainy mist the lights of a monastery. Cold and inclement was the weather, and he stopped and knocked on the door. When the abbot came, he said, "May I come in?" The abbot said, "Not only may you come in, but you may eat with us." The food was wonderful; the monks were warm; it was a beautiful evening, safe and dry and warm. Because the weather was so bad, they asked him to stay the night. He agreed, he said, on the basis that they would supply him with a few things. "What is it you want?" they asked. He said, "If I spend this night with you, I must have in my own room for myself alone this night a pound of butter, a pair of rubber pants, a poker, a cricket bat, and a bass saxophone." It was unusual. They scurried around the monastery and found it all. The weather continued bad, and as they went to sleep that night, they heard the awfulest progression of halftones and squeaks and squawks coming from his room. Because the weather continued bad, they invited him to stay another night. He did do that, and he asked again for that mysterious list of the same things: a pound of butter, a pair of rubber pants, a poker, a cricket bat, and a bass saxophone. Each night he requested those things, and each night they heard the awful noises, until finally it was time for him to leave. The old abbot walked him to the door and said, "We were glad to supply all of those things, but would you mind telling me why you asked for them?" The stranger said, "Well, it is a family secret. It has been in our family for years and years, but if you promise not to tell another living soul, I'll tell you." And so he told the old abbot all his heart, and the abbot, being a man of his word, never told another living soul. And so we shall never know.

There is something else we shall never know either

- how come the parable in 4:26-29 is only found in Mark's gospel?

You have to feel for Mark

- he writes the first gospel  
and just about everything he says is taken up by one of the other gospel writers  
and kind of 'over shadowed'
- however the parable in Mark 4:26-29 occurs nowhere else  
this parable, and this parable alone, is unique to Mark
- we do not know why neither Matthew, nor Luke, nor John took it up  
it is a real mystery, a secret even  
but it does give us a clue that there is something special about this parable  
and there is ...

So what is the 'secret' of this parable?

- it has something to do with "the kingdom of God"  
it tells us something about "the kingdom of God"
- "the kingdom of God" is a way of talking about 'the reign of God'  
the day when God's will will be done as perfectly on earth as it is in heaven
- that is the goal of God for the whole universe

In this parable the farmer scatters seed, that is the farmer's job [Slide 3]

- the farmer scatters some seed in a field  
then he sleeps at night, is up and about during the day, doing something
- but there is no mention of watering or weeding  
no mention of fertiliser or talking to the little plants
- and the seed, well the seed just keeps on growing  
while the farmer does ... nothing

The farmer does not even have a clue how what is going on is going on!

- the farmer scatters the seed and then does absolutely nothing while the seeds grow ... all by themselves

Those who like to give titles to the parables call this one:

- “the parable of the seed growing secretly” [Slide 4]
- which gives us a bit of a clue, a bit of direction

This parable seems to point out the passivity and the helplessness of human beings

- the farmer does not, indeed cannot, make the seed grow  
we cannot make God’s kingdom come
- human beings can frustrate and hinder the coming of the kingdom  
but we cannot stop it
- similarly we can create the situation where it is given the opportunity  
to come more fully, but we cannot make it happen
- ultimately it is up to God  
and God is the one who can and will make it happen
- this is indeed good news, because it means it is not up to us  
if it was up to us, we might botch it big time  
but we cannot, because God is in charge of the growing

Does that mean we do nothing – that all we have to do is sit back and wait? [Slide 5]

- I don’t think so!  
and indeed I will tell you what I think we have to do a little later on

The parable also tells us that although ‘growth’ may be imperceptible

- there is always growth
- if you watch a plant every day, you cannot see it growing  
but if you see the plant, and then see it again after an interval
- you can certainly notice the difference

Reflecting on this parable William Barclay includes this observation:

When Elizabeth Fry went to Newgate prison in 1817 she found in the women's quarters three hundred women and numberless children crammed into two small wards. They lived and cooked and ate and slept in the floor ... she found there a boy of nine who was waiting to be hanged for poking a stick through a window and stealing paints valued at two pence. In 1853 the weavers of Bolton were striking for a pay of seven and a half pence a day and the miners of Stafford were striking for a pay of two shillings six pence a week. Nowadays things like that are unthinkable. Why? Because the Kingdom is on the way. [Slide 6]

The parable gives us this message of encouragement:

- even though you may not be able to see it, the kingdom of God has been growing  
and continues to grow

The parable also tells us that this growth is constant

- night and day, even while we sleep, growth goes on
- human effort and human goodness are often rather spasmodic  
one day we take a step forward, the next two steps backward
- however there is nothing spasmodic about God  
the work of God goes on quietly, unceasingly
- as the hymn says: *“God is working his purpose out, as year succeeds to year ...”*

The parable reinforces the absolute certainty of growth

- in spite of whatever else may be happening or not happening around it the seed grows ... day and night
- the growing establishment of the kingdom may go unnoticed but it is certainly present
- it began with the ministry of Jesus and continues right through history, to our very own day

This growth is inevitable and nothing can stop it: nothing

- a tree can split a concrete path with the power of its growth even a weed can push its way through asphalt [Slide 7]
- in spite of selfishness, injustice, greed, war and the like, God's work goes on we are assured that nothing in the end can frustrate the purposes of God

We are also assured that all this 'growth' has a goal

- there will indeed be a harvest we just have to be patient
- often we humans tend to think in terms of the moment but God has all eternity in which to work
- and we are to be a people of hope in spite of what news coverage might show us of people's inhumanity in spite of those who feel there is more cause for despair than anything else (in the church as well as in the world)
- we are the people who know God is in charge and that good things are growing!

So do we just sit back and wait??? [Slide 8]

- what did the farmer do ... nothing? No! The farmer did two things: scattered seed and harvested
- we are to do the same

This parable says: don't worry, relax, enjoy

- our task is to scatter seed – all kinds of seed some of this seed will grow, and some won't
- that is not our concern, that is up to God

We are to keep on scattering

- with our Sunday and Wednesday services our prayer times
- with Rhythm'n'Riggles, monthly coffee mornings C+K's Craft Group with all the things we are doing, those we are planning or have yet to do
- the ones that grow, the ones that take off ... we are to be ready to carry on the ones that don't seem to go or grow we are not to worry about just scatter some other kind of seed

Just remember the old farming adage: "Don't be cheap with the seed"

- that is our job, to scatter the seed ... so I invite you to consider: what seed are you scattering in your life during the week? what seed could you scatter this coming week?

I find this very encouraging, hopeful, empowering

- a parable for us, for each and everyone of us  
scatter the seed and go about your business  
and keep an eye out, be on the lookout for
- be ready to roll up your sleeves and gather whatever harvest springs up

Even though what we do may appear insignificant, even pointless

- do not be discouraged!  
never ever give up! [Slide 9]
- because this parable assures us there will be a harvest  
a certain harvest from next to invisible beginnings!

I was also very taken with what Mark records in verses 33 and 34 of Chapter 4 [Slide 10]

*Jesus used many other stories when he spoke to the people,*

*and he taught them as much as they could understand.*

*He did not tell them anything without using stories.*

Part of 'seed scattering' is telling stories which help people understand

- pointing out where and how God's kingdom is growing right here, right now  
for example, here's a real sign of that:
- in his maiden speech to Parliament Russell Norman, Green Party member  
and confirmed atheist virtually read the Christmas gospel
- he told the story of Christmas  
of God the creator being born on earth as a baby in a stable  
and what it means for us today
- wow! that sure seems to be some seed growing!

So let me conclude by doing as Jesus did ... telling you something to go with all this:

The moso is a bamboo plant that grows in China and the Far East. After the moso is planted, no visible growth occurs for up to five years [Slide 11] – even under ideal conditions! Then, as if by magic, it suddenly begins growing at the rate of nearly seventy five centimeters (2 1/2 feet) a day, reaching a full height of twenty seven and a half metres (90 feet) within six weeks! [Slide 12] But it's not magic. The moso's rapid growth is due to the miles of roots it develops during those first five years. [Slide 13]

I began with a fable about a secret we can never know

- let me tell you a secret that we do know, because Jesus reveals it  
in this parable that Mark alone records
- remember we are in charge of seed distribution [Slide 14]  
God is in charge of growth and time
- the farmer scattered seed then harvested:  
you are to scatter seeds
- you are to do what you are called to do  
to live as a faithful follower  
give an account when called to  
tell stories which help people get it
- and be ready for the harvest which is surely coming