

How Does Your Garden Grow?  
Sermon on Mark 4:26-34 Preached at Highland Park UMC  
Sunday, June 18, 2006

My problem in school was that I wanted to take an inter-disciplinary approach to the study of single disciplines. In math class, for instance, if Joe was on a train heading west from New York at 45 miles an hour and Sue was on a train heading east from St. Louis at 60 miles an hour, the main question in which I was interested was philosophical in nature: Why were Joe and Sue traveling by train? Alternately, I took a literary approach: Were the trains metaphors symbolizing the existential journeys both Joe and Sue were experiencing? Did the fact that their train would meet foreshadow the collision of star-crossed lovers?

Similarly, when asked in biology how plants grow, I was inclined to answer poetically, “With silver bells and cockle shells and pretty maids all in a row,” which hardly provides a satisfactory horticultural explanation. Of course we know that plants grow by getting their energy from the sun through photosynthesis, the process where chlorophyll, the green pigment in the plant’s leaf, absorbs energy from sunlight and, using this energy, water, and carbon dioxide, produces oxygen and simple sugars. The plant then uses these sugars to make more complex sugars and starches for storage as energy reserves, to make cellulose and hemicellulose for cell walls or with nitrogen, to make proteins.<sup>1</sup> The accumulation of cellulose and proteins causes the plant to grow.

And while that account satisfies the rational, scientific mind, it ignores the poetry and mystery and even the theology of how a garden grows. It took the twentieth-century German theologian Joachim Jeremias to point out that whereas moderns look at fields of crops or flowers and wonder about cell biology and photosynthesis, the people of the Bible would look at those

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<sup>1</sup> Edward B. Rayburn, “Plant Growth and Development as the Basis of Forage Management,” West Virginia University Extension Service paper, December 1993 at <http://www.caf.wvu.edu/~forage/growth.htm>.

same fields and wonder at the miracle that was taking place in them: Where once there had been only small, insignificant, seemingly lifeless seeds, now there is full, abundant, productive life!

Which raises the question of how we see God and the way God works in our lives. Because we are products of the Enlightenment and because we live in a scientific and materialist culture, we are taught to distrust that which we cannot prove by testing and analysis. We are taught to believe that we can know a thing only through direct experience of phenomena that we then subject to rigorous experimentation. Science, as Huston Smith explains, is really just an extension of our vision: “the entire scientific world is an enlargement by microscopes and telescopes of what we can see. But for all its importance, vision can’t take in everything.”<sup>2</sup> Is God’s activity in the world—let’s call it the kingdom of God—to be explained in terms of the scientific method, by means of observation and testing to produce empirical data which can be measured and quantified and repeated for verification with the results to be published in a peer-reviewed journal? Or is God’s way of working in the world to be seen differently entirely?

Jesus often told his followers little parables about the kingdom of God. Parables are stories or riddles or metaphors that Jesus told not so much to explain how things are as to challenge his listeners to look and listen and think about life. In telling parables, Jesus used ordinary, everyday people and places and situations that everyone could relate to. And here Jesus tells two stories involving seeds.

In the first story, Jesus says, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head” (Mk. 4:26-28). After sowing the seed in his field, it seems that the farmer has little to do: He sleeps and rises, night and day. There is no talk of plowing or preparing fields, no

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<sup>2</sup> Huston Smith, *The Soul of Christianity: Restoring the Great Tradition* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005) xvi.

mention of applying fertilizers or pesticides, no thought given to droughts or storms, no hint of securing crop insurance or federal subsidies. This probably is not what they teach in agronomy courses at Tech or A&M.

The earth produces *automatē*, we would say “automatically” in English—of itself, without visible cause. Here is where science ends and the mystery of growth begins. “After the initial act of scattering the seed on the earth, the man’s activities have no effect on the seed, which sprouts and grows—he knows not how.”<sup>3</sup> The mystery of “the germinal power of the seed”<sup>4</sup> occurs. It is not just sugars and starches becoming cellulose and proteins that cause the seed to grow. It is the urging hidden deep in the purposes of God that sends life surging through the tiny seed, bursting open the tomb of its husk, sending forth, as the grand old hymn puts it, “First the blade, and then the ear, then the full corn shall appear.” The power of life, the power to grow, the power to become that which it is created and intended to be is built into the seed.

The kingdom of God is like that, Jesus says. The way God rules and works in the world and in our lives is like what happens to the seed after it is scattered: it is nourished in the soil of receptive hearts, watered with the plenteous grace of God, and grows to maturity under the careful tending of the Holy Spirit. And like the farmer, we have no control over the process. The farmer goes about his work of sleeping and rising, night and day, while the seed, too, goes about its work of lying in the field, rising up through the ground. Without the farmer knowing how it happens and without being anxious for it, the seed grows and develops on its own. Finally the growth is complete, the grain is ripe, and the crop is ready for harvest. And so it is with the kingdom of God. Just as the farmer waits for his crop to grow, certain of the harvest to

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<sup>3</sup> Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, Black’s New Testament Commentaries (London: A & C Black, 1991) 135.

<sup>4</sup> William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1974) 170.

come, so we are called to wait for God's coming kingdom. We cannot hasten its arrival or bring it ourselves, but we can wait in patient confidence that it will come.

So what does this story of the seeds' secret growth have to teach us? First, it reminds us to consider how we look at our lives and how we understand God to be at work in them. Do we subject God's activity to the scientific method, trusting only that which can be seen and tested and repeated? The parable reminds us that work is going on, that change is occurring, that growth and transformation happen, often far beneath the surface of things. Indeed, it is in the darkness of the soil, nurtured by the rain from above and the nutrients from below, that the seed germinates and takes root, ready to send the first tender blade above the surface.

Second, the parable reminds us that growth is the gift of God, and not our work. As St. Paul said of his ministry of evangelism, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth" (1 Cor. 3:6). To be certain, we often speak of "building the kingdom," but that is misplaced pride. Our job is to scatter the seed, the seed being the life-changing good news about God's love available to all made known in Jesus Christ. Fertilizing through prayer is good; watering through Bible study is important; cultivating the soil through works of mercy and piety is vital. But God works in God's way to bring about the growth of the kingdom of God.

Finally, the parable gives us hope. We may look at our own lives or at the state the world is in and wonder where God is: How can God's kingdom possibly be real if I am ill or out of work or experiencing family problems? How can God's kingdom possibly be real if there is war and poverty and suffering? The parable tells us that from next-to-invisible beginnings, from beginnings that are small and insignificant and to all appearances lifeless, there comes a sure and certain harvest. In God's time and in God's way, the crop of peace and joy, the harvest of righteousness and love grows up in fulfillment of God's promises.