

June 14, 2015
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Mark 4:25-36

Grounded in God

The kingdom of God is like a carefree farmer. That's what one of the two parables from today's gospel says: The kingdom of God is like a carefree farmer. That's an odd comparison. That's what parables are, odd comparisons, strange pairings. In Greek, *para* means "alongside," like parallel, and *bole* means "toss." Parable, tossing alongside, putting into action two unlike things, describing a difficult or esoteric concept using different, concrete, often surprising terms.

The kingdom of God is like a carefree farmer, someone who plants by flinging seeds, and then they go to bed. This farmer lacks precision—and apprehension. They just toss the seeds out in some general direction—scattering being an action that does not require aim, or anxiety. After the day's work they can sleep at night.

And, in fact, you don't even need to be a farmer. That's what I'm calling this person, but they're not identified as such, it's just someone, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seeds." Actual farmers hearing this would be relieved, because this is not sound agricultural advice, it's a parable, a story of someone who does something in a particular way, an odd way, a way of planting that doesn't require understanding. The parable makes a point of that, of the marked absence of understanding on the part of the seed flinger. The seeds grow, and he does not know how. Someone tosses seeds; someone, anyone can toss seeds, the parable seems to say, just go out and scatter. Then go to sleep, and then get up again. That's all the planter does. He scatters, rests, and rises. There are other action verbs in this story, but they don't refer to the one scattering seeds.

It's an odd story, the parable of the carefree farmer, and it appears only in Mark's gospel, and so it may not be as well-known as other parables—like the other one we hear today, the one pictured on the bulletin cover. Matthew and Luke have that one, the one about the mustard seed, which though tiny, grows so great that its branches hold the birds of the air. What a great parable that is, and how rightly beloved! What a great symbol for faith, that mustard seed, so very tiny, so incredible, what it does and how it grows. The mustard plant is pungent, and prolific, it's actually a weed, its wildness and vitality a great symbol of the gospel. Then there's also that saying about faith the size of the mustard seed, Jesus says that in the gospel of Mathew, that faith the size of a mustard seed can move mountains. But this parable today, this scattering parable that Mark pairs with the mustard seed parable, this parable may be less well known, but it is just as important. Mustard seed faith is inspiring. Mountain moving faith is amazing. But scattering faith, someone—anyone faith, knowing-not-how faith, resting-and-rising faith, this is also what the kingdom of God is like, this is the story of what Christian life looks like in the day-to-day, this is what God calls us to do and be. The parable of the carefree farmer is the story of confident faith.

Scattering, not knowing how... I think of all the Step Up Now Capital Campaign letters we've been scattering, sending out, all the announcements and emails, all the invitations to help us fix the gym. Sometimes, especially when I haven't gotten enough sleep, it seems to me we're just always asking people for money. We are. We're inviting people to be part of this, invest in this place, take root in a place that cares for children, and education, and recreation, and community. It's an invitation to be part of something, a building, a congregation, being recreated.

Scattering, not knowing how... I think of a workshop I attended a couple weeks ago at the annual gathering of Lutheran churches in the Chicago area. It was about a new worshipping community that has a special emphasis on twenty-somethings, it was led by a man who was twenty-something himself, wearing hipster attire, with wild, great long dreadlocks down the middle of his back. He talked about the need that he and his peers had for meaningful conversations about matters of substance, how they were eager to directly engage in activism, and experience authentic community. He was passionate and compelling, a mustard seed kind of guy, but what really moved me was a conversation I had after his presentation with a pastor couple I know and admire. They'd attended the workshop, too. I saw them listening to him, with proud smiles on their faces. One of the co-pastors, the woman, explained, "Years ago he was one of our Confirmation students. And he was horrible. My husband literally had to hold his hand during the classes, to keep him part of it, to get him through it. And here he is. We teased him that we were going to come to his workshop and go up and hold his hand during his presentation."

As a Confirmation teacher myself, I loved hearing that story, and I promptly told it to other teachers here, and now again now to you, because that's a story we need to know and hear too, a story of scattering seeds, of scattering, and resting and rising, and growth happening, and we know not how.

The kingdom of God is like a carefree farmer, because the kingdom of God is about the growth that happens because the gospel is alive, the gospel is fruitful. The kingdom of God is like a carefree farmer because the kingdom of God is less about the work we do, than the freedom we experience, the grace that makes us a new creation. As 2nd Corinthians affirms, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. That's what the kingdom of God is like, it includes us, and so much more than us, as in this parable, the kingdom of God is about the one scattering seeds, but even more it is about the ground, and the growth, and the harvest—the kingdom of God is about God, and what God does.

The Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich talked about God as the "Ground of Being." It's a signature phrase of Tillich, his attempt to describe the complex and esoteric concept of God. God as the Ground of Being, God as the baseline to existence, the foundational essence upon which all both rests and is activated. I don't think Tillich meant "ground" as concretely as dirt, but I think it fits with this parable. God as the ground, the earth, the substance of all that has been and all that will be. God as what makes things grow, the activator, the source of productivity. You don't even know how it happens, but it happens. The kingdom of God happens without our knowing it. The parable says the earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.

That's what this parable is about: it's about the ground, and the growth, and the harvest, it's about surprising flourishing. It's about God, the source of all that is, pushing all things heavenward. That's what the kingdom of God is like, that's the good news of the gospel. The ground is fertile. The fruit is forming. The harvest is sure. The parable says of the harvest, "When the grain is ripe." When – not "if", not "maybe", "when." "When the grain is ripe... The harvest has come." The harvest is so certain as good as here. In the language of the parable, it has already arrived.

We do not create it. We do not even know how it works, but we do have a part in it. "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed." "Someone" Anyone. You, me, all of us. When we tire, we rest, and then we get up again. In Christ, we rise. Toss with confidence, fling with faith. Scatter seeds.