

Pentecost 4

June 17, 2018

Sermon by the Reverend William J. Eakins at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT

It may be just because it's Father's Day that the parables in today's Gospel remind me so much of my own father. He wasn't a farmer and he wasn't even that much of a gardener, but it was my father who showed me how to plant seeds.

I must have been about five or six years old when Dad took me to the hardware store one warm spring morning and showed me the seed packets of all the vegetables and flowers that we could grow. I was captivated by the brightly colored pictures of all the wonderful plants we could have in our garden simply by buying some of those shiny little envelopes.

Back home we turned over the fragrant earth to make a long, narrow bed against the fence at the back of our property. It was pretty hard work. Dad's shovel kept hitting rocks when he was digging, and he had to use a big pickaxe to get them out. I helped out as best I could with a little spade. I was really looking forward to opening the packets we had bought to see what the seeds looked like and then get them into the ground so they could turn into the plants pictured on the front. But when the soil was turned over, my father said we still had more work to do. The clods of earth had to be broken up with a hoe and the clumps of grass and weeds shaken and pulled out. Then the whole garden bed had to be raked smooth. After that, my father used the rake handle to press furrows into the soft earth. When we had done all of this, we were at last ready to open the packets and start planting seeds. It was surprising to see how tiny most of the seeds were, how hard it was to shake out only a few at a time into a furrow. I had to get my face right down next to the earth to see some of the seeds. When we were done with our sowing, my father skewered each empty seed packet on a twig and placed it at the end of the row. A good watering with the hose and everything was done - everything except the waiting, the seemingly endless waiting for what we had planted to sprout.

Every morning I would run out to look at the garden to see if anything had come up in the night. I can still remember the joy of seeing the row of tiny green leaves on the radishes I had planted poking up through the brown soil. And although I can't remember anything else about that first garden, I still recall the delight and wonder of pulling out the first plump red radishes of our crop. I didn't actually like radishes, but I was very proud of the result of our labors and awed by the miracle of what can happen right in your own back yard when you take the trouble to plant some seed.

Amazing things happen with tiny seeds, and they happen in places other than a garden. When I was rector of Trinity Church, Hartford, I received a letter from a man named Ken Batcheller, a retiree living in Florida. He introduced himself as having served as an acolyte at Trinity many, many years earlier. He said he had many happy memories of those boyhood years in the parish, especially the Boy Scout troop. Did we still have Boy Scouts at Trinity? I wrote back to Mr. Batcheller and told him that scouting was alive and well in the parish and was sorely needed in the inner city neighborhood around the church, an area which had changed considerably and not for the better since Mr. Batcheller's youth. I sent a copy of the parish welcome brochure to give him some idea of the ministry of Trinity Church nowadays.

A short while later, Mr. Batcheller sent back a reply. In it he reminisced fondly about the Scoutmaster of the troop back in the 1930's, a dentist named "Doc" Lane. "Doc," he said, had taken a keen interest in all the boys in the troop, had always been available to lend a sympathetic ear when anyone was in trouble. He'd helped a number of former Scouts to find jobs during the Depression and had even convinced Ken Batcheller's sweetheart to say "yes" when Ken proposed. Ken told me that "Doc's" life had fallen apart through alcoholism in his later years. Nonetheless, Ken had always remembered his old Scoutmaster with gratitude and affection and wanted other boys to benefit from the values of a scouting program. Ken

Batcheller enclosed a check for \$100,000 to endow his support for the Boy Scouts at Trinity Church for generations to come.

“With what can we compare the Kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs ...” Little did “Doc” Lane realize what would happen as a result of the good seed that he sowed in the lives of the boys in his Scout troop. He was probably just doing his best to be fatherly, to be kind and understanding to the Scouts in his responsibility. He probably also found happiness and satisfaction from doing this. But he could not have known the impact that he would have on a boy like Ken Batcheller and, through Ken’s generosity, upon boys in Hartford sixty years later. It is as Jesus tells us: there is a power in every Godly action that is beyond all expectation, like the power packed within the tiniest of seeds. The seed once sown, even by imperfect people like “Doc” Lane, people like you and me, has a way of sprouting “night and day,” whether we are asleep or awake. My father introduced me to that great truth when we planted that garden many years ago. It is a truth that all of us, especially parents, would do well to take to heart. God is able to do greater things for us and for those we love that we can ask for or imagine. Whatever we do with Godly intention, God can use to bring about good results that exceed our expectation. The love we give to our children, our attempts to teach them “whatsoever things are true and lovely,” none of this is ever done in vain. The care that we give to the young people of St. John’s parish, the care that we give to the young people of Hartford through our support of Grace Academy and Covenant Prep, the support we give to students of San Sauveur School in Haiti, the vegetables that we are growing in our community garden to give to our neighbors - none of this effort will be lost. It is good seed that in God’s good time will sprout and grow and produce a harvest beyond our knowing.

Little did my father realize what would happen with the good seed that he sowed in my life. I am sure that there were times, particularly during my adolescent years, when Dad must have felt pretty frustrated and disappointed with me. I sometimes seemed to reject much of what he tried to give me. Yet I do not think that anything my father taught me that was Godly was ultimately unproductive. The good seed had power to withstand my rejection and to wait within me for the right season to sprout and grow.

As I think back to my gardening experience with my father long ago, I am struck by the fact that sowing good seed requires a lot of careful, often hard work on the part of the sower. Seed, even the tiniest seed, may “sprout and grow we know not how” but it certainly will have an easier time of it if we work at breaking up the hard soil to make it ready to receive the seed. Also, the seedling will more readily take root and flourish if we provide the water and other nourishment the young plant needs. God’s Word, the Scripture promises us, is never spoken in vain. However, people are more likely to hear and believe God’s Word if their hearts are first softened by our kindness, patience, and faithfulness. Our children will be more likely to welcome the Good News of God’s love for us in Christ if, first, they have experienced a measure of that love from us.

A favorite Thanksgiving hymn begins, “We plow the fields and scatter the good seed on the land, but it is fed and watered by God’s almighty hand.” Often there is little that seems to result from our labors, just barrenness or a whole lot of weeds. It is then that we need to hear Jesus urging us to take courage and leave the outcome of our work up to God.

I love the movie *Oh, God!*. It is a humorous but profound contemporary treatment of the Biblical story of God’s dealings with the creation. In the movie, there is a scene where God’s advisors throw up their hands in despair over the terrible things happening in the world and urge God to give up on the whole project. And God, played by the inimitable George Burns, responds, “Oh, I don’t think so. You never know; a seed here, a seed there, something will catch hold and grow.”

The Gospel according to George Burns is right on the mark, says Jesus. The Kingdom of God is like seed, packed full of amazing power, waiting to sprout, waiting to grow. So prepare the garden of your life. Sow God's good seed there and then trust that God will do the rest.