

Message for June 13, 2021

Mark 4:1-20

The manse that we lived in years ago in Colborne had a huge vegetable garden and I use the word huge on purpose. Susan and I though never had the heart to grass it over and so every year we planted corn, potatoes, beans, carrots, and Swiss chard. I have to be honest though and admit that I soon discovered that I did not have a green thumb; indeed I quickly discovered that if I were a farmer I'd starve! I remember one occasion in particular.

It was my day off and Susan and I were planting the seeds; she was ahead of me making the troughs while I followed her on my hands and knees dropping in the seeds and covering them up. It was a very hot and humid day and the sun was blazing down on us. I was getting hotter and more uncomfortable by the minute and started to mutter under my breath about the stupidity of it all, noting that the seeds were so small and the soil looked so lifeless. When Susan just ignored me, I became all the more vocal. I could imagine the beans making a go of it but it was beyond me how the carrots ever would! What a complete utter waste of time! And yet it wasn't; enough of the seeds did take root and flourish to make it all worthwhile.

In today's scripture passage, Jesus told a story about a farmer who went out and sowed his crop. Some of the seeds fell along the pathway where they were promptly devoured by the birds. Some of the other seeds fell on the rocky ground where there wasn't much depth to the soil. Those seeds sprang up quickly but, because the soil was so shallow, those plants were quickly scorched by the sun and perished. Yet other seeds fell amongst the thorns and other weeds and so they never had a chance. The remaining seeds however fell on the good earth where they took root and flourished, resulting in a bountiful crop.

Later when Jesus was alone with his disciples, they asked him to explain the meaning of the parable to them. Jesus said that they were like the farmer in the story and that they were to plant the seeds of faith in the world around them. Some people would hear the good news of the gospel with indifference and would have no interest in it whatsoever. Other people would hear the good news and respond with enthusiasm. Their faith and commitment would flourish, at least for a short period of time. Then, when confronted by the challenges of life or when

things didn't turn out the way that they had prayed they would, they would lose heart and fall by the wayside. Still yet other people would hear the good news of the gospel and greet it with enthusiasm, but then, when their faith began costing them, they too would be gone.

I am sure that at this point the disciples may have felt discouraged and asked themselves if there was any point to their ministry. All of this certainly sounded discouraging and yet, said Jesus, the disciples could take heart; they could and should because of the last group of seeds, those that fell on the fertile ground that took root and flourished bringing forth an abundant crop. Those seeds represented all of the people who would hear the good news of the gospel, respond favourably and be there for the long haul, as if it were. It was these people who would make the disciples' hard work and sacrifices worthwhile.

Now this of course was a supremely realistic story for both the original twelve disciples and us as well. As the disciples of Christ, we are called to sow the seeds of faith in the world around us. The truth however is that despite our best efforts, not everyone will respond positively. Some people will not for whatever reason, be interested in the good news of the gospel. Other people will be interested at first but, for whatever reason, will not be around for the long run. Yet others will be interested as long as things go their way and live up to their expectations. Once things don't however, they too will be gone. And yet Jesus promised, enough seeds will take root and flourish to make it all worthwhile. The message of today's passage is that we are all called to be sowers. In fact we may sometimes even be planting the seeds of faith without ever realizing it.

I recently read about a woman in New York City who has spent the last two decades in an urban ministry in one of the most impoverished and toughest parts of the city. A person once asked her how she had become involved in what is oftentimes a difficult and discouraging ministry. This was her reply:

“When I was sixteen, I went with my church youth group on a working summer mission trip to Appalachia. At the end of the week, we had worship and during the service, or maybe right afterwards, one of the adult leaders said to me, ‘Sharon, I bet you will spend the rest of your life in service to the needs of others’”.

That adult leader had no way of knowing it but a seed was planted that day that not only took root but flourished. There is also an example of this from the life of the well-known preacher William Willimon.

Willimon, who is one of the most respected preachers in the United States today, was invited back to his home church to preach. He eagerly accepted the invitation as he especially wanted to see one of his former Sunday School teachers. That man had had such a powerful impact on him and played no small part in his decision to enter the ministry. Willimon met the man and told him about the powerful influence that he had had on him. His response was to say how inadequate he had felt as a teacher and how glad he had been to give it up. It is so ironical that that man who had had such an influence on Willimon and helped plant the seeds of faith, never even realized it.

So it is with us. What seeds were planted by others that have led us to where we are today on our journey of faith? What seeds have we planted, perhaps without ever realizing it? What seeds have we planted, that while now seemingly dormant, will sprout and flourish in the years ahead? The truth of course is that none of us really know, and we might well wonder if it is all worthwhile. Indeed while not pertaining to anything particularly religious, this was brought home to me during the past week.

More than twenty years ago I took a course on how to read and transcribe medieval English handwriting. The course was a challenging one since back in the Middle Ages there was no punctuation, no standard spelling and many of the letters were shaped somewhat differently from the ones we use today. After I finished the course, I then became involved in what was known as "The Logge Register Project". The Logge Register contains 379 wills that were written between 1479 and 1486 in both English and Latin. The idea behind the project was to transcribe the wills into modern English so that they would be easily accessible and readable for historians today. This was a very long and challenging project, especially given the fact that medieval handwriting is generally even worse than mine! After years of work though the task was finally completed and the register was published as a two-volume set in 2008.

While browsing the internet during the past week, I found mention of the register and the website even gave a list of the universities that had a copy of it. Needless-to-say it never became a best seller! I found myself wondering though; while I certainly enjoyed the challenge of transcribing those wills, was all of the work and labour by myself and the other transcribers worthwhile? Did it or does it mean anything to anyone?

The truth of course is that I have no way of knowing the answer to these questions, and so it is with all of us and our lives. Whether it be our sowing the seeds of faith or the influence that we are having on other people in general, none of us truly know what impact we are having. This is where faith comes in. It takes faith to sow the seeds in the first place and it also takes faith to trust God for the results; that some of the seeds will bear fruit in God's own good time. The truth is that we are having an impact on the lives of others and the world around us, even if it isn't obvious now or won't be for years and perhaps even decades to come. But this is what gives us hope, that we and our lives really do matter. And they do simply because no one less than Christ himself has said so.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, as we come to you in prayer this day, we acknowledge that there is so much pain and heartache in the world around us; there is the ongoing pandemic, the residential schools with their terrible legacy, and this past week there was the horrific killings in London. We pray for all those devastated by these events, and we pray for our society itself and the safety and well-being of all. We pray too that we, individually and together, may shape a society where everyone may live as you desire all of your children to live, in peace and security.

In the aftermath of this past week's General Assembly and the decisions made, we pray for the larger church of which we are a part, for her well-being, her unity, and her ministry.

We give you thanks for the ministries that you have entrusted to us. We confess that all too often perhaps we live our lives and wonder if the things we say and do really matter. Help us to realize that they do matter simply because we ourselves matter. Indeed, we matter so much that you became one of us in the person of your Son, so that we might have life in all of its glorious abundant fullness. And for this we give you thanks, for the dying and undying love of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We pray this day for all for whom life is not so good and kind, for all who are ill, all who mourn, and all who simply feel overwhelmed by it all that is happening in their lives and the world around them.

Grant us and all your children, the strength, peace, and courage that only you can.

We ask these things in your Son's name.

Amen