

## Grow: Faith in a Seed

Mark 4:1-9

October 30, 2022

One of my very favorite writers, Barbara Kingsolver, has a new novel out this month. It's an ambitious project—a reimagining of Dickens' *David Copperfield* set against the opioid epidemic ravaging contemporary southern Appalachia. The title of the book: *Demon Copperhead*. In reading the reviews last week, I came across an appreciation of Barbara Kingsolver written by fellow novelist Ann Patchett, who wrote, "She means to save us by telling us stories...She's able to tell us things we desperately need to know in a way that makes it possible for us to hear."

When I read those words, I thought immediately of the teaching ministry of Jesus. Stories meant to save us. Stories that tell us what we desperately need to know in ways that make it possible for us to hear. Parables, we call them. Their purpose is to reframe our vision, to rearrange our priorities. It's Reformation Sunday, and I'm reminded of one of John Calvin's famous lines—that scripture is, for the believer, a new pair of spectacles through which we see the world. Parables function in that way. They reframe our vision. They rearrange our priorities. They transform the mundane, everyday, ordinary aspects of life into channels for divine truth. When Jesus spoke of God's kingdom, he told stories. He used parables. A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers. There was a woman who lost one of her ten coins. There was a man who had two sons. A sower went out to sow seeds. There's nothing unusual about that. It happens at the same time every year in the same places. A sower went out to sow seeds. Nothing unusual about that. Except, *listen!* This story is meant to save us. Let anyone with ears to hear *listen*. What are we meant to hear in this simple story? Perhaps more importantly, how are we to respond to it?

I found that most interpretations of the parable focus on God as the sower, the seed as the message, and we humans—that's right—as the dirt. So it goes, we are called to be fertile ground for the growth of God's kingdom. It's a powerful image. It's one that challenges us to more intentional discipleship, to more regular practices of faith. The moral, in short, of this interpretation is: be good dirt.

But there is another lens, another perspective, another set of spectacles, we might want to use to look at this parable. And to be honest, it's the one that intrigues me most for Second Church in 2022. What if, here and now, this simple story is not a description of what God does *to* us, but a prescription of what God asks *of* us?

It's Commitment Season. In two weeks, we will dedicate our giving goals for 2023, and those pledges for the year ahead will determine our congregation's capacity to dream, our ability to make plans for the programs and ministries, the mission outreach of our church. And this year's theme, "Growing Together," is meant to focus our collective attention on the possibilities of this moment in the life of our faith community. Possibilities for growth, for deepening of relationships and broadening of impact. From where I stand, as we prepare for another year of ministry together, the opportunities for sowing seeds are nearly unlimited. How we choose to embrace them will determine the future vitality of our congregation. And I am convinced that it is time for growth, opportunities in every direction.

But of course, there are the challenges as well—challenges that I welcome. There is the challenge of articulating a compelling faith for the next generation. The challenge of asking ourselves the

question, “What message will these first graders receive from their church in the years ahead? What kind of faith do we intend to cultivate among them?” There is the immense challenge of serving a rapidly changing community of neighbors, of putting down deeper roots in Washington Township and the city of Indianapolis, of facing and meeting, responding faithfully to the challenges faced by our neighbors. There is the challenge of offering authentic relationships in an age of shallow connections. The challenge of seeking hope in a time of despair and unity in an era of division. As I survey the landscape of challenges around us, I truly believe that we have been called together, assembled by God, for such a time as this, equipped with seeds to sow to grow God’s kingdom in the city of Indianapolis and far beyond it.

As I read this parable again in preparation for today’s sermon, a children’s song that I had not thought of in a long time returned to my mind, and I’ve been singing that children’s song all week long as I have been writing (though I’ll spare you that particular form of distress today). The song is titled “The Garden Song,” and while it was written by David Mallett, the voice in my head—mediated through the tape player in my mother’s minivan—is unavoidably John Denver.

Inch by inch, row by row  
Gonna make this garden grow  
All it takes is a rake and a hoe  
And a piece of fertile ground.  
Inch by inch, row by row  
Someone bless these seeds I sow  
Someone warm them from below  
Till the rain comes tumblin’ down

I’m convinced that this is where the parable of the seed meets the story of Second Church. For 185 years, the people of this church have courageously and joyfully sown seeds, trusting that God will bless them. And God has blessed those seeds in extraordinary ways. And now, it’s our turn. This is the moment God has given us to invest what we have been given in the mission of the church. It is a mission that matters, that *matters*. A *mission* that *matters*.

And so, as you prayerfully consider your own call to support your church in the year ahead, I hope you’ll reflect on what this place means to you. I hope you’ll ask, “How has my soul been nurtured by the gifts of worship and community?” I hope you’ll ask, “How have I been challenged to grow in faith? Where have I found a deeper purpose?” I hope you’ll ask, “How have I been inspired by the witness and the work we share here?” Yes, I hope you will give some time and devote some attention to how the church has served and blessed you.

***But do not stop there.*** Remember: parables reframe our perspective. They turn the world upside down. They reorder our priorities. And we are not only the soil in which God’s word has been planted. We are called to be sowers of the seed as well. And so, I also urge you to consider what this place means not just to you but to your neighbors. I urge you to ask what this church means to our city. I urge you to ask what this church means to a group of first graders, reading their first Bible. And yes, I invite you, I urge you, I encourage you, to ask what this church means to the spiritual health of our nation. Consider the truth that there are those not very far from where you now sit whose life and health depend on the seeds you plant here. Consider that the courageous and compelling witness offered here serves as a beacon of light shining in our city. Consider that the lessons learned in these classrooms, stories shared in these hallways, the relationships built in this space, and the faith nurtured here will grow exponentially by God’s grace—30, 60, 100-fold.

Let anyone with ears to hear listen to this. We are not finished yet because God is not yet finished with us. What we have here is a story meant to save. The story of a God whose grace is more powerful than all that seeks to separate us. The story of a Lord and Savior, a teacher and guide, who calls us to act in compassion and mercy, to advocate for justice in our city. The story of a church that is large enough for people on all ends of every spectrum. A church whose mission is grounded in deep and sound theology—not cults of personality or ideology. A church that takes the Bible seriously as the living word of God. The story of

a church where God is active, awakening and calling and compelling and commanding and equipping and sending. It would be a tragic shame if you choose to put those seeds in your pocket or plant them with too much discrimination and care or hoard them in fear of coming scarcity. It would be a tremendous loss to the work of God's kingdom if your story goes untold, your seeds unplanted, our future compromised by caution.

Four summers ago, when we moved into our new home in Carmel, Sara was eager to take advantage of the full sun in our backyard to plant some tomatoes. What followed was a booming harvest of cherry tomatoes, often more—far more—than we could keep up with on our own. And so, we got to know our neighbors by taking them cherry tomatoes. But the most zealous tomato picker among us was our son Ben. He was not quite two years old at the time, and he had a wonderfully unique technique. He would pick a tomato, and then he would run around the yard. He would take one bite out of it and then drop the tomato somewhere in the back yard. We enjoyed watching him, his exuberance and joy. And then, a few weeks later, the unexpected happened. I was mowing the grass, and I saw them: volunteer tomato plants springing up all over our yard, thanks to that young farmer. It was a parable. When the soil is right, the roots go deep. When the seeds are extravagantly sown, growth is what happens. The fruit that fed our son fed our neighbors as well.

In 1862, Henry David Thoreau died. Several years later, a dozen notebooks were discovered. They were notebooks that contained Thoreau's unpublished essays and poems, and one of those essays is the result of an intricate scientific study Thoreau conducted revealing how patterns of wind and weather and the behavior of animals tend to move seeds about to produce new plants. Always able to discover the profound truth in nature, Thoreau closed his essay with these words: "Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been planted, I do have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have planted a seed, and I am prepared to expect wonders."<sup>i</sup>

Second Church, two truths I know:

If we plant no seeds, there will be no growth.

But, if we sow the seed of faith that we have been given, if we extravagantly share God's grace and our abundance, we can expect wonders.

It's all about having faith in a seed. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Henry David Thoreau, as quoted in *Faith in a Seed: The Dispersion of Seeds and Other Late Natural History Writings*, Island Press, 1993. p. xvii.