



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 3 Proper 6 (B)

Green Thumbs

RCL: 1 Samuel 15:34-16:13; Psalm 20; 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, [11-13],14-17; Mark 4:26-34

Have you ever known one of those people with eternally green thumbs? You know, the person who seems to walk by, and plants just naturally perk up? The person whose yard is an explosion of color; whose orchid is perpetually in bloom; whose seeds always germinate, and sprout as they should? The beginning of this gospel – “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” – brings to mind those people with green thumbs. Because, though our gospel makes it sound easy – scattering seed on the ground, and sleeping and rising night and day – if you are a person without green thumbs, it might be that you scatter the seeds and they lie, unchanged, in the earth.

This metaphor – the way Jesus describes the kingdom of God – makes it sound, on first read, like it comes to fruition by itself. Like there’s no responsibility we have to the seeds. I wonder, though, if that’s entirely true. Looking at people with eternally green thumbs – and thinking of ourselves and our, perhaps, not-green-thumbs, it’s easy to believe that this is just a fact of life; that our thumb colors are unchangeable, like hair color or eye color. But it might be a bit more complicated than that.

Care goes into seeds, even before they are planted. Each packet is dated and put in a cool, dry place to aid in its germination rate. Good gardeners will keep track of how well different seeds have performed. Green-thumbed people can tell you which variety of tomatoes gave the most fruit and which was sweetest. They can tell you what crops underperformed, or which seemed to attract pests. They haven’t just planted the seeds, and walked away – they’ve paid attention, noticing what flourishes, and what struggles.

Care goes into the soil, too. Many gardeners have worm bins or compost piles, churning out what they call “black gold” – rich, fertile soil for the garden beds. People with green thumbs are constantly evaluating their soil – sometimes even sniffing the dirt! – and determining what it needs more of. They add amendments to strengthen the nutrition base. They keep track of what has grown where so they can rotate their crops, allowing the seeds themselves to deposit and draw from the earth to strengthen the health of the whole.

Care must be given to watering seedlings. More than one green-thumbed gardener has confessed that they talk to their seeds, perhaps humming while working in the garden, or perhaps adding chatty commentary about who is growing well, or who is doing a good job. Water can be a tricky balance – the ideal is the Goldilocks measure: not too much, or the seeds will drown, and not too little, or they won't have what they need to sprout. Water has to be just right, again demanding a level of care and attention from the gardener, asking us to notice when rain has fallen, or when a day is particularly hot.

I've been thinking about green thumbs and this parable, and wondering whether there might be more responsibility in scattering seed, in creating conditions for God's kingdom to take root than it might at first appear. There is a lot of unseen work that gardeners do – ways they have earned their green thumbs. There's dedication in tending to the plants, even before they are scattered. I wonder if there's unseen work – responsibility – that we have, too. How do we create favorable conditions for the kingdom of God to flourish? How do we prepare the soil and care for the seeds and bring our best to them?

In order for the kingdom of God to take root, its seeds need to be cared for – kept in a place to ensure their healthy germination. This happens when we read scripture and pray. We hold on to seeds, deep inside our hearts – and they wait there until it is time to be scattered.

Our soil is made nutrient-dense when we rest it from constant planting. Sabbath is one of those practices – giving us some time for our soil to lie fallow – some time for the earth to replenish itself. Sabbath practice is one of ceasing, and pausing – it's counterintuitive to the world, which would have us work without ceasing. Our soil is turned and aerated when we pray and take time to dwell with God. Delving into the Word creates space in the soil, keeping it from compacting and preparing it to be good ground in which God's kingdom will take root.

We water our small seedlings when we pray or meditate, when we take time to be with God. This might look different for different people; for some, being with God is singing along to worship music, and for others, it's sitting in silence. For some, it might be in reading a book, and for others, in going on a walk. Taking time to abide in God, the seeds we are caring for are scattered into good soil and nurtured as they grow.

The kingdom of God is like a seed – it is coded, already, with the plant it is going to grow into. But it still needs good soil to take root. It needs levels of nutrients and water and a clear patch of earth to call its own. While we don't have to do the work of creating the seed, we do have a responsibility to prepare the soil. The kingdom of God will surprise us with how and where and when it pops up – but we still have to do the work of green thumbs. Amen.

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