

4 Pentecost B, Proper 6, June 17, 2018. Mark 4:26-34.

If you were to dig down deep into my soul, past the parts that I wouldn't mind you seeing, to get to the real bedrock of what I trust and what my basic wiring is, you would find that despite my stated beliefs, what I really trust most is hard work. I think this is an indicator that I am not yet fully converted from the blue collar boot straps culture of my upbringing, where my family wasn't poor—we just weren't rich *yet* and hard work was what would change that. I don't approve of myself in this regard, but honestly the worst thing that you could call me is lazy and my first instinct in taking on *any* problem will be to throw work at it. I doubt that I'm alone in this particularly American heresy.

Today's gospel lesson offers a sharp rebuke to my unwelcome assumption that effort will save us—and thus that hard work is what finally gives our lives meaning. Mark's Jesus gives us two distinct parables about the coming of the kingdom of God. In the first, a guy goes out and scatters some seed. But in the days before super-technological agricultural practices, he has no control or understanding of whether and how the seed grows. He scatters the seed, he sleeps and rises, and the seed in deep and undisturbed mystery sprouts and grows. The dark fertile earth produces of itself.

Now, this scatterer of seed is not lazy. He does his job of throwing seed around, and when the time is right he gets to work immediately with his sickle, because the harvest has come. He is a hard worker, but he also understands what work can do and what is beyond the reach of human effort. He can plant, and he can harvest, but the heart of the matter—the sprouting and growing—is not something that his labor can force to happen. And so it is, Mark would have us know, with the kingdom of God, that reign where justice and mercy kiss, where love and forgiveness replace the law. We are not simply passengers in the coming of God's kingdom. There is a great deal of work that we can do. But finally its coming is God's work, not ours, and our role is to prepare the ground and then to discern when the time is ripe for us to leap into whatever Christian actions are analogous to harvesting.

The second kingdom parable is also agricultural: God's reign is like the least impressive seed imaginable, that grows into a massive, well, shrub, that provides protection and rest. At the risk of getting a touch too technical, Jesus is here subverting traditional ancient imagery of kingdoms as mighty trees and subjects as birds able to build homes in them. The kingdom of God is like that, but also unlike that because we aren't dealing with the cedars of Lebanon, but with an invasive shrub with a stinging taste and a reputation dangerously close to that of weeds. If we were down South, I might mention kudzu. Jesus' point of course is familiar to us if we've been paying attention: God's justice and peace begin among the lowly, in the places and lives that the powerful

might consider insignificant or inconvenient. It begins in a baby from a poor family, born to an unwed mother in a stable. It begins with the carpenter's son, among fishermen, rabble-rousers, and collaborators who live up in the sticks, on Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

So the kingdom of God is something with which we can work, but which we cannot make happen. And if we were fishing for materials with which to build God's kingdom on our own, chances are we'd pick the wrong materials or seeds anyway. This first sounds like bad news, because we are thirsting, parched for justice and peace, love and mercy now. This week we all raged about what is happening at our nation's southern border, and following the farmer's lead of going to sleep and rising and waiting doesn't feel at all right. It is a problem that we'd like to throw all our labor at, and it feels like bad news that the justice God promises is something we can't make happen, even though we are desperate for it. Just as I read it as bad news when all the "what to do about family separation at the border" articles I read this week consisted entirely of organizations on the border to whom we might make donations and phone numbers of rulers we could call to plead with. So where is the good news in this for us this week, when we feel that horrible combination of angry and powerless?

First, we must remember that the Christian hope for the world is not for the cessation of one discrete cruelty, however barbarous or demonic, but for the coming of God's kingdom. Of course we fight cruelty, of course we do everything in our power to recognize all people, stamped with the image of God, as our siblings in God's family. But our hope doesn't come from that fight. That fight comes from our hope. And our hope is that while we sow and till and water and cut away weeds, and indeed work as hard as we can, God is at work in the dark quietly cracking the seed open with new life that cannot be contained. Or less parabolically, our hope is that while we do our best to restrain evil and to pursue the loving good, God is at work converting the wicked (including sometimes us) and redeeming the pain of the suffering, creating the world that we cannot: where God's reign is all in all.

Because our hope is bigger than the cessation of specific cruelties, we don't just fight against. We don't just tear down. We build, we dream, we love. Sometimes what we are able with God's help to build doesn't look particularly impressive, and this is the good news of the mustard seed. It may make no sense that our small difficult local work could make much of a difference against the rulers of the age. But our God is something of a specialist in using the unimpressive or unlovely to change the world. From David the youngest son who wasn't even invited to the king tryouts to Jesus of that no-count town Nazareth. It is kind of what God does to build a kingdom from a mustard seed, to save the world through a baby refugee, to invite even us into the coming of the kingdom. The love of Christ urges us on. With anger, yes, but even more, even more, with hope. Amen.