

“Tending Faithfully”

When I was young I lived across the street from my grandparents and together they were one of the most important influences on the development of my life and character. My grandmother was a great grower of all things, and their yard was full of all sorts of beautiful flowering shrubs, fruit trees, grape vines, and a large vegetable garden in the back, teeming with seasonal goodness. I remember one spring going over there and finding them working in the garden. I don't remember how old I was, but I do remember that we were in the midst of a drought and the Virginia clay that that passed for soil there was really dry and hard. My grandfather was using his gas-powered tiller to break up and churn the hardened, packed earth, kicking up dust everywhere. When he was done, he started throwing out handfuls for hard corn kernels in the last two rows he had made. Like I said, I don't remember how old I was but I was old enough to know you had to have rain to grow anything, so I said, "Papa, what are you doing?" And in the simplest way, he said to me, "preparin' for rain."

I think even as a child I understood what he meant. Plant growth requires preparation, ongoing toil and care, and eventually, harvesting. It calls for constancy and consistency over the controllable conditions because so many parts, like the rain that waters the earth, are not controllable. In other words, growing things is about faithfulness more than anything else. There are things that you control, and there are things that you don't control. Much like the farmer in the parable, we don't know how the seeds will actually grow, we don't know when the rain will come, which of the seeds will sprout and produce a good yield, which plants might be affected by some blight this year, or any number of things that may impede the life we are trying to cultivate, and so we have to simply be faithful to the things we know are our job.

I am reminded of one of the best examples we have in our Christian faith of someone who embodied just this mindset. A few years after her death in 1997, the Catholic Church decided to publish Mother Teresa's personal diary so that her inner life of faith could be a gift to the church at large. One of the most surprising parts of the diary is that we find that this wonderful woman of faith who did so much for the betterment of humanity and to make God's kingdom more evident on earth went through a long period of what we might call spiritual drought. She said for almost two decades during her ministry she continued to read the scriptures and pray to God, but never felt God's presence or heard God's voice answering her and telling her what to do in her prayer time. But she kept at her ministry anyway, because she writes, 'I have already heard Jesus tell me in the scriptures what he wants me to do - tend the sick, care for the poor, befriend the lonely. And so these I will continue to do until I hear his voice anew.' And she went out every day, and when she saw someone alone and outcast, she spoke to her, when she met a leper, she bandaged his wounds, when she came across the hungry, she fed them. This persistence of practice, this resiliency of resolve, is what in our tradition we simply call faithfulness, and it is what the kingdom of God here on earth is built on.

There is another old story told about Mother Teresa at the beginning of her ministry that I think also sheds light on the mustard seed parable of today. She was walking the streets of Kolkata, with a potential benefactor, hoping to get his financial support for her Sisters of Charity. They talked about her vision as they strolled the streets lined with the destitute who had been cast off like human garbage, to the point that eventually most stopped thinking about them as people and start ignoring them even as they stepping over them like debris in the road. The man, worried that his monetary support would pale in comparison to the massive scale of the poverty, said to her, 'the need is so great, like an endless sea of suffering, what can you do?' And she stopped him from stepping over the nameless, faceless human being lying afflicted on the street beneath them, and she bent down and took his leprous hand in hers, and said, "I can help this one." Her devotion to such simple acts of faith and love built an empire of sorts that we could only call the kingdom of God come among us. But it grew from acts so small that many would have seen them as insignificant, like the tiny mustard seed that grows into the great shrub that can offer shade and shelter to the birds of the air.

The lesson is that great things in this world can have very humble beginnings. Mustard is really more like a weed. It will grow up in the wild from the smallest seed. While other plants spring from the ground and spread quickly, the tiny mustard seed quietly comes to life by sending out a single root into the earth, confident in its source of nourishment. And while those others are gone in a single season, the slow, steady progress of the mustard seed growth continues on for many cycles. That steadfastness is what accounts for its growth and greatness. Whether we are talking about the Christian sowing seeds of loving-kindness to grow God's kingdom, or the seeds of ministries themselves that will make that kingdom evident among us, the key is a resoluteness of intent and loyalty of action that we call faithfulness in our tradition.

Too often we have bought into this myth in America that greatness goes hand-in-hand with grandness, and this gospel is trying to disabuse us of that notion and set us straight. In the economy of God, greatness goes hand-in-hand with faithfulness. It often has humble origins, like a little, insignificant seed, and an almost indiscernible path of growth, but in all things it is marked by a simple devotion.

We don't determine greatness, it is outside of our control. But we know that our cause is great even if our role seems small. And we don't need to be grand, because our God is grand, and that is taken care of, and while we sleep and rise each day that God is at work in ways we don't even recognize. What we need to commit to is simple faithfulness. We will till the hardened soil in our world - the places where hope has dried up and people have stopped even praying for rain need to be stirred up, tended and softened so that they are ready to receive new life. We will plant more seeds than we think are needed - try new things, offer fresh ideas, and continue to plant the seeds of kindness that we know are indicative of Jesus' ministry, because not every seed will grow into a thriving plant. And when the rains fail to come, we will water them ourselves with our own prayers, energy, efforts, and resources to keep the growth going. This is the life we have been called to as followers of Jesus. And like the life of the farmer in the parable, it can be mundane, even monotonous, but it is the faithfulness that leads to abundant life, for us and for the world.

Last week I was reading an article from the New York Times writer David Brooks, entitled "The Small, Happy Life." He had asked readers to send in essays describing their purpose in life and how they found it, and had received a few thousand responses. He writes that he had expected responses to follow the predictable tropes of our high-achieving culture - dream big, set lofty goals, and try to change the world. But he was surprised to find that many respondents had gone in the opposite direction - choosing to pursue a small, happy life.

One man wrote in and said, "I don't know what my purpose is, but if there is one thing that keeps me focused, it's the garden. Lots of plants died during the harsh winter, but, amazingly, the clematises and the roses are back, and lettuce, spinach and tomatoes are thriving in the new greenhouse. But the weeping cherry tree in front of the house succumbed to old age. I still have to plant a new tree this year." There is always work to do.

Brooks concludes, "there is something beautiful and concrete and well-proportioned about tending that size of a garden. "Perhaps the mission [in life] is not a single great mission at all. ... Everywhere there are tiny, seemingly inconsequential circumstances that, if explored, provide meaning" and chances to be generous and show love. Spiritual and emotional growth happens in microscopic increments." Being faithful in those moment is truly what living in the kingdom of God is really all about.

That is why on this day we are taught pray this prayer: 'Keep, O Lord, your household the Church in your steadfast faith and love, that through your grace we may proclaim your truth with boldness, and minister your justice with compassion; for the sake of our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.'