

**YOU CAN'T IMAGINE; MARK 4:24-36; JUNE 14 2015;  
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Fitting parables we have today – the sower of wheat and the parable of the mustard seed. It's June, month of luxurious rain and sunshine.

I ordered four yards of topsoil and four yards of mulch four weeks ago; I did some research on grass seed as I was determined to grow grass where the salt from the street over the winter had wiped out whole swaths of yard.

I spread the topsoil, wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow, raked and smoothed and raked again; this was organic topsoil filled with nutrients – from Clarence, New York. Surely this would ignite the specially selected grass seed and we'd have a lawn again. But no. I waited and waited and waited. Only dirt. Then about ten days ago hundreds of tiny, tender blades of light green grass began sprouting through the topsoil; although I was ready to take credit, the abundant rain we've had over the past month, the sunshine, and the good earth together produced the miracle not me but I was glad to be the 'sower.'

The parables of Jesus can be taken in multiple ways. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the parable of the sower was often interpreted to refer to the inevitable growth of the church and the coming progressive reign of God.

That interpretation might have worked as late as 1960 for mainline churches and 2000 for evangelical churches but we cannot assume today, like we could in 1955 that the Christian church in North America will just continue to grow.

We live in a different era. One way to look at the parable of the sower at a time when many churches struggle and play a seemingly reduced role in the wider society might be this: Some hear the gospel and do not persist in their responsiveness; but the parable affirms that on the proper soil the word bears fruit beyond one's wildest imagination.

Vincent Van Gogh at the beginning of his painting career was enraptured with a painting by his mentor Jean Francois Millet entitled *The Sower*. The painting captured his imagination, it resonated with something deep inside him; he talked about a "power seething" within, an urge to make new art, to paint for humanity.

Jesus' story today points to a 'power seething' inside the Word of God; a power that, when the Word is spread upon ready and willing hearts, brings forth life even as a seed germinates and produces grain. The parable of the sower says we share a partnership with God; our role is to prepare the soil, hearts and minds, and spread Good News at the right time, in the right place.

This is the work of evangelism, calling people 'out of the world,' out of darkness, which is what "evangel" means. We spread Good News in more ways than we realize; when I look at my Muslim or Jewish friends I see their actions as an expression of their religious beliefs and values. So too for followers of Jesus. *We spread the Gospel by the way we live*. But being faithful sowers also depends on our trust in that 'power seething' within the Word of God.

It's not easy to separate ours and God's role in the germination of faith and action. It is a common experience of young preachers that what they prepare in a sermon, the point they want to make, may have nothing to do with what people hear. It is also true that what the preacher thinks might be the worst sermon she's ever preached will be exactly what someone on a given day needs to hear; or, conversely, what the preacher thinks is the best sermon she's ever constructed will fall on deaf ears.

This is more than an illustration of God's sense of humor; it illustrates the parable today. Once the Word of God is released there is no telling what will happen, what germinating miracle will take place in the hearts of those who receive it, what abundant fruit of ministry it will produce, what brave decisions and actions will burst forth in people's lives.

There's no telling because it is the Spirit of God, not the spirit of the preacher, that produces of itself, like the grain of wheat, and we cannot control the Spirit.

Of the many things that awakened my own faith and influenced me to consider the ministry, one of the chief influences was my mentor, William P. Barker. I got to know Bill when our family moved to a suburb south of Pittsburgh where I started high school and where he was pastor of the Presbyterian Church.

Bill continued to be a guiding influence in my life through college and divinity school. Proud of his Scottish heritage, he held a doctorate in New Testament Studies, he was a superb preacher and one of those pastors who did not forget one name of his 3,000 member congregation; to be in his presence was to feel as if you were the only person who mattered; to be in his and Jean's home was to be an honored guest and eventually, over the years, family.

Bill Barker built powerful urban ministries of social justice and outreach in the churches he served; he was frugal and wise about money; he was a world traveler and had a global perspective on the issues of the day; he established working partnerships with the local synagogue and the large Roman Catholic parish nearby.

Bill played the bagpipes and collected and repaired antique clocks in his spare time; when I stayed in his home on visits from New Haven, it seemed you could hear every one of the 47 clocks on all three floors tick-tocking through the night; in high school, back in Pittsburgh, when a close friend and I went to his home on Saturday mornings to talk about the bible, Bill's references to the Scripture were always in the Greek from the New Testament or in the Hebrew from the Old; for all of his gifts and accomplishments it was his humility that sparkled through.

That's a thumbnail sketch of a person through whom God spoke – I do not mean just in his sermons and his impressive ministry but, as I got to know him I could see a continuity between what he said and what he did—the word for which is integrity. But it wasn't just integrity; it was an overarching concern for others, for justice, for a better world, for sharing from his abundance that caught my imagination – even as a teenager.

So when he said at the end of my senior year in high school, "Tom you should consider a year of seminary after college" he planted a seed.

The last thing, at that time, that I or my family or friends expected me to become was a parish minister. In fact, it took me about six more years to figure it out after exploring teaching and law and deciding with relief that those were not my callings. I mention Bill Barker today as an illustration of the parable of the sower because it helps us to see a human life representing the Word of God.

That is the goal of why we are here – to be rooted in, nurtured by and construct our lives around – whatever you choose to call it: Jesus, the Word of God, the Good News, life-giving values that are bigger than the darkness that threatens the human family, a way of living through which we find ourselves.

We are talking about the botany of faith—the organic process by which God’s presence becomes persistent in and shapes a human life. As much as Bill was an influence on me, he was the messenger, the sower. It was the belief and value system I could see at work in his life, that took root in me; it was the power seething in and life force of biblical faith that germinated in my heart and mind.

I use Bill Barker to refer to the other parable today as well – the parable of the mustard seed: tiniest of seeds it grows up to become the greatest of all shrubs and puts forth large branches so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.

When I made those trips from New Haven to Allentown, Pennsylvania to spend the weekend with the Barkers you never knew who would be staying there or coming for dinner or stopping by to say hello or calling from anywhere on the globe to catch up.

Missionaries, colleagues, theological students like me, young pastors, others he somehow knew and attracted. His congregation in a Pittsburgh suburb established one of the first partnerships with a black church in the city in the early 60s; it was an exchange of a dozen families from each congregation committed to worship and serve in each other’s churches for three years. You see, Bill’s faith and that of his church had grown into one of those huge mustard trees that has branches and shelter everyone, that welcomes all and judges none.

The Gospel today invites us to live our lives big, to live in partnership with God. It invites us to root ourselves in God’s Word and to point to and be sowers of the reason we live the way we live; the formative principles and values that are behind the myriad decisions we make the hundreds of little and big things we do each day.

I’m not sure we mainline Presbyterians live our lives and reveal our belief systems that publically these days. We’ve become distracted with overly busy schedules and a disjointed kind of living; we’ve succumbed to a secular intimidation that silences us from talking about who we are and what really moves us to be who we are; the result is our reach and influence are limited.

Yet, if we’re not here to find life and to share the life we find then why are we here? What is it we baptize Kiella and all of our children into if not a life that is full and rich and fulfills God’s dream for them?

A stunning article in last week's *Christian Century* says that mainline churches are the worst at holding onto their children and the worst at attracting and keeping young adults.

The take away from the Pew study that was cited is that mainliners need to focus on passing the faith on to the next generation. Mainliners, the article says, may need to borrow some of the ethos of evangelical Protestants who seem to do a better job at this; a better job equipping families to be primary incubators of faith and forming identities that are distinct and more oppositional, in some ways, to the culture than we have been willing to be.

Telling the truth, showing the motivation of the faith we subscribe to – that forgives and heals and brings people and nations to their fulfillment is what we are called to do; whether or not it brings institutional growth.

It's an organic partnership we are called and baptized into, not just bits and pieces of scholarly data or information about Jesus or the bible;

but a two-way, life-giving covenant,

like marriage or friendship, that demands and expects our best. Amen.