

Proper 6B - June 14, 2015
1 Samuel 15:34-16:13; Psalm 20; 2 Corinthians 5:6-17; Mark 4:26-34
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In Sync With God

“Religious belief consists of the belief that there is an unseen order and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting to that order.” - William James

Today we hear two of Jesus’ shorter parables. The first is called by some the Parable of the Patient Farmer. Here the coming of the Kingdom of God is compared to a corn harvest, in which the great harvest is set in contrast to the smallness of the seeds sown and also in contrast to the relative inactivity of the farmer after the seeds are sown. The farmer follows an orderly routine of sleeping and waking, and a work schedule that does not involve him having anxious thoughts nor taking any particularly active steps. The seeds themselves grow—from stalk to ear, and then from ear to ripened corn. Each stage is named in this parable, thus describing an unceasing process of growth until, suddenly, the moment arrives which rewards the patient waiting. The corn is ripe; the sickle is thrust in—the harvest has come! So it is with the Kingdom of God. With the same certainty as the harvest comes for the farmer after his long waiting, so does God, when the final coming of the Kingdom (or reign) occurs.

So, when will this be—when will God’s Harvest come? For 2000 years people have been asking! I learned long ago, starting with my wife, never to ask a pregnant woman who is in her ninth month, “So, when’s the baby coming?” That reminds me of a passage from the Book of 2 Esdras which reads, “Then I answered and said ‘How long? When will these things be? Why are our years few and evil?’ [And] The angel answered me and said, ‘Do not be in a greater hurry than the Most High. You, indeed, are in a hurry, for yourself; but the Highest is in a hurry on behalf of many... Go and ask a pregnant woman, when her nine months are completed, whether her womb can keep the child within her any longer’ [4:33, 40].”

This parable of the Patient Farmer implies that we humans can do little or nothing with regard to the final consummation. We can only wait with the patience of the farmer for harvest time, or with the impatience of a woman about to have her child.

A little context here: this parable was probably intended as a contrast to the efforts of the Zealots to bring on the final Messianic Age through a forcible revolt to throw off the Roman imperial yoke. It’s likely that within the ranks of Jesus’ own disciples at least two—Simon the Zealot [also called the Canaanean] and Judas Iscariot—were present or former Zealots. Possibly within his own ranks, and certainly in other circles, people were questioning why Jesus wasn’t fulfilling their expectations of the Messiah warrior-king who was to raise an army, overthrow the Roman occupation, and restore the fortunes of the children of Israel.

This parable was probably also intended as a contrast to the more non-violent yet apocalyptic Essenes whom Jesus knew, that small but influential Jewish sect who held that the Messianic Age was coming soon and would bring about a purging out of the “children of darkness” and the establishment of the purified community of the “children of light.”

In the eyes of both of these camps, wasn't Jesus' refusal to lead a revolt, or a messianic purge, a denial of the claim and purpose of his mission? Well, this is a parable through which Jesus replies to doubts about his mission, and to frustrated hopes. Consider this farmer, Jesus says, who patiently awaits the time of the inevitable harvest. So too, God's hour comes irresistibly, and is already in motion.

Now, that's not to say that human action doesn't count for anything. Quite the contrary; after all, the farmer collaborates, co-labors, with the divine growth, and aligns his life and work to that Divine Power of Life already at work. God acts – in giving the power of life intrinsic in the seeds, and in providing abundance in the combined strength of soil, water, sun and the farmer himself – and the farmer initiates by sowing the seeds, presumably after having plowed, then by watering and eventually harvesting. St. Paul summarized his own ministry in a similar context when he wrote, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. [1 Corinthians 3:6]” Therefore, this parable is not a call for inaction or complacency; rather, it's a call for getting in sync, in *right* action, as it were—action aligned with God's presence and purpose and power. This is crucial, for so much of what we do that we call “action” ends up being *distraction*, or misplaced action, or hyper-action, or inaction or reaction—all of which can prevent us from taking action that is *in sync*, in right relationship with God and God's purposes.

Along with the second parable we hear today, of the Mustard Seed, both parables have some common features. First, the seeds from which these plants grow are hidden before they come to light. So, too, with God who is present and active in every part of our life, though often hidden in plain sight. These parables are about God's Presence! Secondly, they're about God's Purpose—God wants us involved, in sync with God. And so, human hands are involved in the seeds' planting and nurture. Without God we cannot; and yet without us, God will not, as St. Augustine put it.¹ Although we're not “bringing in” God's Kingdom, as it were, nonetheless, we are called to be *signs* of the Kingdom, and *agents and instruments* of God's purpose. And thirdly, these parables speak of small and seemingly insignificant beginnings which end up having lavish, even extraordinary, results. And so, they're also about God's Power; for this contrast—the insignificance of the beginning and the triumph of the end—is not the whole truth; for the corn harvest and the massive mustard shrub are the result of the seeds themselves, *and* of the God given soil and sun and rain, *and* of the human action in sync with God's Power at work in all of this. The end is implicit in the beginning. The infinitely great is already active in the infinitely small. And so, what we do, in sync with God's Presence and Purpose and Power, can and does make a difference.ⁱⁱ

So, as we've looked deeper at these parables of Jesus, I put before you two quotes - seemingly contradictory. First, from Martin Luther King, Jr. and then from the Catholic

monk and writer Thomas Merton – I share these with the intent of holding these perspectives together in a paradoxical tension. Dr. King wrote:

“Justice delayed is justice denied...We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of *now*. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us standing bare, naked and dejected with a lost opportunity...Over the bleached bones and jumbled residues of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words: ‘Too late.’...This may well be [hu]mankind’s last chance to choose between chaos and community.”ⁱⁱⁱ

And now, Thomas Merton,

“...being attentive to the times of the day...the reason we don’t take time is a feeling that we have to keep moving. This is a real sickness. We live in the fullness of time. Every moment is God’s own good time. The whole thing boils down to giving ourselves, in prayer, a chance to realize that we have what we seek. We don’t have to rush after it. It was there all the time, and if we give it time, it will make itself known to us.”^{iv}

These different perspectives come together as we realize that all of us are called to be - and sow and attend to – these seeds in the world, in sync with God. When we deal with the issues and people in our personal relationships, in the workplace, in various communities and in society at large, we are called to make the principles of love and justice effective as far as possible. Yet we cannot escape the conclusion that society as such is often brutal and that our acting on these principles may in our short lives be never more than tiny seeds in it. Large and powerful social, economic, political, and religious forces at work today seem hardly qualified by really ethical considerations. So, if we can do nothing else, we can bear witness to God until the day when bitter or even catastrophic experience will force individuals and institutions and nations to a humility which we do not now possess. To be a seed sown, or to be a patient farmer, is to live as though humanity alone is responsible, as though humanity alone can secure a sustainable future for ourselves and all those who come after us. Yet, it is also to live with the understanding that God alone can save us, and with the sure hope that God will fulfill God’s purposes and become “all in all.”^v And so we pray as though everything depends on God, so that we can act as though everything depends on us.

This unwavering assurance that God’s hour approaches is an essential element in the teaching of Jesus. God’s hour is coming... rather, it has already begun! In God’s beginning the end is already implicit. And in Jesus’ own work as the patient farmer, the sower—what have you—no doubts with regard to his mission and methods, nor scorn heaped upon him, no lack of faith in his vision or person, no impatience can distract Jesus or make him waver in his understanding, that out of nothing - even with his motley bunch of disciples – even with us - ignoring all failure, God is nevertheless carrying on God’s beginnings to completion. All that is necessary is for us to take God

seriously, to get in sync with God's presence and purpose and power, to take God into account in spite of all outward appearances.

ⁱ Quoted in Robert Edward Luccock, If God Be For Us: Sermons on the Gifts of the Gospel (New York: Harper, 1954). In Augustine's actual writings, the quote that comes closest to this is, "He who created you without you will not justify you without you." (in his 169th Sermon).

ⁱⁱ In the seeming insignificance of that motley crew of disciples – and in our present day - the great event is already in motion.

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin Luther King, Jr "Letter from Birmingham Jail"; and "The World House" in Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 191

^{iv} Thomas Merton, A Hidden Wholeness, p. 49; see also Quoted in David Steindl-Rast, "Recollection of Thomas Merton's last days in the West" in *Monastic Studies*, 7:10, 1969.

^v 1 Corinthians 15:28; Ephesians 1:23.