

Seeds, Shrubs, and Skateboarders

Beginning just before Christmas, my gardening friends start swooning over seed catalogs. They dream about what they will plant and when. They map out schedules and organize raised beds in their imaginations, as well as on sheets of graph paper, on their computers, or even on backs of envelopes. My grandfather was like that. He raised beautiful roses and juicy tomatoes in carefully tended beds in their backyard on Knollwood Drive, a quiet street tucked away in a lovely neighborhood in Nashville. He pruned and tended and sprayed for bugs and covered tender stems if frost was predicted. He hovered over delicate seedlings in his greenhouse, keeping them sheltered until they were strong enough to make it outside.

My great-great Aunt Judy was more like the first and second sowers—the one who scatters and the one who sleeps—in two of the parables we just heard. Apparently, Aunt Judy would fling bulbs out into her backyard and plant them where they landed. I'm assuming that meant she went to the trouble of digging holes and patting some soil over them, but I'm not so sure. It must have worked though, because she did the same thing every year. And I'm pretty sure it drove my grandfather nuts. Because really, who does such a thing?

While this morning's reading includes a lot of verses, some preacher colleagues make a fairly convincing case for our hearing the entire passage at one time. They see it as one discourse, an extended teaching by Jesus bracketed by the sea on each end. The opening of the chapter tells us that Jesus was walking by the sea. In the passage that follows, Jesus invites the disciples to join him in a boat and cross to the other side. So for the writer of Mark, it is important to hear these parables together, because one parable alone does not give us a clear picture of the kingdom, not even close. Taken all together, an image starts to emerge, but it's almost like looking through a blurry lens or a kaleidoscope. Jesus' parables give us glimpses of the kingdom, not a cut and dry blueprint. It is tempting to turn the parables into allegories, where each character is directly tied to one thing, and only that thing. It's tempting to want to solve them like a puzzle, but that flattens the parables and removes the mystery they point to. And, as my friend Andrew Foster Connors reminds me, "*Understanding* is not the primary value in Mark. It's *discipleship*." He also adds that "This will be challenging

for Presbyterians.”¹ Well, yes, but I’m guessing we Presbyterians are not alone. People of faith have always wanted to figure Jesus and his puzzling parables out, to unlock the mystery, and have the life of faith spelled out for us like a map that will lead us where we need to go if we just do what we’re told and stick to the script.

But the life of faith does not follow a script, does it? At least not one I can see. I love to think of myself as good soil where the word of God and faith have grown and thrived, but that oversimplifies it, flattens it and robs it of its richness and complexity. The sower graciously keeps casting the seeds, and yes, those seeds land in the just the right spot at the perfect time on occasion, but they also land where nothing grows, among rocks and thorns and right where a hungry bird can snatch them up. If God is the sower, does that mean that God flunks the gardening test? I don’t believe so. Is it the soil’s fault if she is too rocky or thorny for faith to thrive and grow? Does that mean she is lost forever with no hope of ever receiving a seed again? Goodness, I hope not. There have been times when my heart has been as hard and dry as cracked earth, when my very being has been thornier than the fiercest rose bush, and by the grace of God somehow the sower has passed my way again and given me another chance for the seed to take root. I think the sower can also be seen as the disciples, as the church, called to scatter the good news maybe even a bit recklessly with abandon. Our work may not always take root, but like the sower in the later parable, when it does, we cannot take all of the credit. As Paul tells the church at Corinth, “I planted, [another] watered, but God made it grow.”²

And even when the seed takes root, Jesus tells us that it does not necessarily grow into the beautiful rose we expect or the majestic tree we envision. If it looks anything like the kingdom Jesus describes, it may very well wind up as a shrub, a scraggly, invasive mustard plant. So the kingdom of God is likened to an unwelcome plant rather than a mighty cedar. It is not grand by anyone’s standards, especially in comparison to the kingdom of Caesar. Mark is written around the year 70 CE, when the Second Temple is destroyed. Rome is building its empire and spreading its unholy brand of peace through shows of strength and feats of power and oppression. Mark’s community faces persecution and the reality that the promised return of Christ may not happen as quickly as they had hoped. They are well acquainted with the risk that comes with receiving and spreading

¹ The Rev. Andrew Foster Connors in his paper for the Well 2018.

² 1 Corinthians 3:6, Common English Bible

God's word. In the words of Jesus, they are being assured that the trials they face are not signs of the promise's failing. The kingdom is not Mary, Mary Quite Contrary's garden of pretty things all in a row. Thorns are real, as are any number of factors that can snatch hope and faith away in an instant. These factors can also choke fledgling faith and erode a deeper faith slowly and steadily over time. Mark's community knows this, as do many of our neighbors today. Like other images in Jesus' parables, the thorns and the birds evoke more than one thing. Thorns take the shape of systemic racism, entrenched poverty, famine, the lure of a quick fix, or despair. Shallow soil is found in communities hemorrhaging jobs and opportunities. Scorched earth is left behind after endless years of conflict, natural disaster, and violence, and in families decimated by addiction and mental illness. And yet, the word of God finds a way. Faith grows. As does the church. It just may not look like we expect it to:

On July 7, 2007, JD and Nikki Carabin opened their garage to skaters on what would become the first Friday Night Skate. He started small: going out to area skate parks with a cooler of water and a love for these kids no one else seemed to want. JD and his wife Nicky began to invite skaters on Friday nights to skate in their garage. Soon, close to 20 came each Friday night. Many of these kids would show up right after school and stay till midnight. No one was calling to see where their kids were. No one was checking to see if they had eaten. So JD and Nicky began to serve the kids dinner and share the Word. JD confessed, "My wife and I sold anything we had of value to fund the ministry. Eventually we sold our home as well." Over the next few years, a dozen kids stayed with the couple to escape substance, physical and emotional abuse. Meanwhile, hundreds of skaters professed a growing faith in Christ. [And a community of faith known as Serious JuJu was begun.]

Tom—a lawyer—has been a member of First Presbyterian Church since the mid-1980s. In Rotary, Tom first heard about JuJu and decided to take them some meals. He then asked his church to do the same. After a while JuJu couldn't pay the rent, so the church helped. Later JuJu still couldn't pay their rent and shuttered their doors. On that very day, the skate ministry received a grant [from the Presbyterian Church (USA), our denomination] for being a bright new worshipping community. JuJu

resurrected! Paying off their debt and leaving the building behind, Serious JuJu became mobile, taking to the streets. With portable ramps, they set up all over town...

Today, JuJu meets in an urban warehouse. They arrive on skateboards from the surrounding mixed and low-income neighborhood, get rides from [neighboring towns. Some even skate in from 13 miles away.] These kids come rain, shine, or freezing cold— which in Montana is most of the time. Working single moms drop off their kids and express gratitude for a place they know they will be safe and fed. On a recent summer night, a skater thanked our volunteers for the meal and confessed that this would be his only meal of the weekend. Ever since, at the end of the skate night we pass out 30-40 bags of food to last the weekend. Two brothers called home at 9:00 pm to get picked up. Their parents stated, 'No, we are not coming to get you. Find your own way home.' Often, we don't know where the kids are going, but they aren't going home.

Tom drove Evan home to pick up things he needed for the weekend. His parents were getting high and Evan needed to get home and grab a few things before crashing on a friend's couch. Evan's home is two singlewide trailers pushed together with a tarp between. Evan shared that it can be difficult to sleep with the open wall especially when it stays below freezing. Today, Evan's mom threatens to kick him out. 'My family [stinks],' he confesses. 'JuJu is my family.'

Kelly met JD when she was 12 and high. She started coming to skate and get away from the constant influx of strangers and drugs at home. With a brother in prison, a mother constantly high, a stepfather taking too much interest in her, and plans for the family to move out of state, Kelly got out. Leaving home at 14, she knew she had a place to go, JuJu. Back when it looked like JuJu was dead and buried, Kelly believed. She led us— unbelievers, full of doubt. Today, she is emancipated. Each Friday this teenager watches the warehouse like a mama bear: a bold, courageous, no-nonsense leader.

...Last August, JuJu celebrated the Sacrament of Baptism for 17 people...95 witnesses stood on the banks of the Flathead River as each one took the cross and were lowered into the 59 degree water as a sign of their life, death, and resurrection as a new creation in Christ...For hundreds of youth, JuJu is

the only church they will enter. [Juju's] lawyer and champion Tom confessed, 'JuJu has changed me...I used to prosecute kids like these all the time. Now, they've changed my life!'³

The seeds we scatter may not grow in the way we expect; some of them might not take root at all. But if the sower is our guide that does not mean that we stop scattering seeds. We are not called to hoard the seeds or save them for a special occasion. In fact we are called to scatter more, perhaps in ways we've not tried before and in places and among people we may not have considered being worth the effort. And the faith that springs up may surprise us and even change us. Jesus is not patting folks on the back for being good soil. He is encouraging his disciples to risk scattering even when what they offer does not take root exactly as they hoped. Jesus does not promise a rose garden or a bed of roses, to cover all of the clichés. Jesus knows thorns, or he soon will. He will soon know what it is to struggle in another garden, to pray that the path of devotion go a different way. He will soon know what it is to be left alone, exposed to the cruel whims of the empire, bereft of the very ones he has lovingly called to follow him. And yet he continues to call and heal, to save and nurture, to love and challenge and teach and invite, knowing that the kingdom of God is not faraway but has come near, come here, in him. In him that kingdom is still growing in its persistent, invasive, holy, and unexpected way, offering shelter to skateboarders and attorneys, birds of the air and confused disciples, too. The kingdom of God is not just one thing, it is many things and more, with room in its branches for each and every one of us, God's beloved children, all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ <https://www.seriousjuju.com/us>