

Letting God Be God

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Mark 4:26-34

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My dogs Sophie and Micah don't like rain. They *really* dislike thunder and lightning, but they're not too wild about the wet stuff that falls out of the sky, either. It puts a crimp in their plans.

On rainy mornings, they walk to the edge of our small front stoop and peer out. Then they give me a look that says, "What gives?"—followed by a stare that insists, "Take care of this."

It's to be expected, the experts say. We let our dogs in and out of doors, make food and water appear miraculously in their bowls, show them how smart we are by issuing commands and doling out treats. We control their world. Of course they think we're omnipotent.

You've probably seen the bumper sticker, popular here in Asheville, which reads "Help me to be the person my dog thinks I am." I like that sentiment. But sometimes I lapse into thinking, like my dogs, that I can be God.

I'm in good, and large, company, I think. It's the first sin we read about in the Bible. Adam and Eve were living happily in paradise, surrounded by rivers and an abundance of animals, and plants bearing all the fruit they could possibly want. God said to them, "Help yourselves—except don't eat from the tree in the middle of the garden or you will die."

According to the Genesis story, the serpent came around and scoffed, "You're not gonna die. God knows that when you eat of that tree your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God."

That was just a little too tempting. So Adam and Eve ate from the tree that "was a delight to the eyes and was desired to make one wise." We know the end of the story. God was not pleased, and life was never the same for Adam and Eve. Or for the rest of us.

Instead of becoming wise and God-like, the first humans' efforts to be like God only revealed to them how powerless and naked and dependent on God's grace they were.

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And so I'm grateful tonight for this little parable tucked into the fourth chapter of the Gospel of Mark. Most of us are probably familiar with the second one that was just read, about the tiny mustard seed that grows into a tree huge enough to shelter birds. But I don't think we often hear the first one.

Mark was the earliest gospel to be written, and I find it a bit curious that Matthew and Luke, who borrowed heavily from their predecessor in their accounts of Jesus' life and words, chose not to repeat this particular story. Maybe they thought it was too simple, a statement of the obvious. A farmer scatters seeds on the ground. And while he sleeps, the seeds grow into shoots, and then stalks, and then finally produce grain. The end. Not much to it, really.

But here we are, about to officially enter summer this week, according to the alignment of the sun and the earth. And I think it's worth taking a moment to consider this little 50-word parable.

It's definitely not encouraging laziness. The farmer had to prepare the soil and get the seed and scatter it. And probably, being from an arid part of the world, he had to water his crop from time to time. If he lived around here, he'd have to consult Stan Dotson about how to make sure raccoons didn't steal the ears just as they were ripening—a process involving constructing a perimeter with tongue depressors slathered with Ben-Gay ointment, which actually really works.

So our human activity can certainly aid the work of God. But, let's face it, none of us can make a seed sprout, or cause a sprout to grow into a stalk, or a stalk to produce grain. As the parable reminds us, a whole lot of stuff goes on while we're sleeping.

I understand the amazement of it all. The year that I planted corn at Swan Mountain Farm, I went out first thing every morning to see if the seeds had sprouted yet, and then to see if the ears had started forming. It felt like the miracle that it is.

So, the point is that we can be co-creators with God—but God is still God. God is still the only one who can actually turn a seed into an ear of corn. And God is going to do a lot of the work while we're not even paying attention.

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and God is going to do a lot of the work while we're not even paying attention.***

Nancy made a comment in her sermon last Sunday about the era of her life when she was a mother to young children, a pastor under fire, an advocate for women in ministry and people in poverty, and a caregiver to aging parents. "I thought it was all up to me," she confessed.

"I thought it was all up to me." How many of us have said that—to other people or to ourselves? There's so much to do in the world. There's so much that's not right. There are alarm bells going off all the time about the destruction of our earth and the suffering of the people who inhabit it.

So maybe it's important for us to pause and remember that God has already decided to save the world. And it's idolatry to think that it's all up to us. That's trying to turn ourselves into God. It didn't work for Adam and Eve, and it won't work for us.

When I told him the topic of my sermon tonight, Ken shared a quote with me from the Talmud, the collection of ancient writings of the Jewish rabbis: "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly *now*. Love mercy *now*. Walk humbly *now*. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

I really love this quote. It does not let us off the hook for taking the call of God seriously, for engaging the world's pain wherever we feel called to do it. But it helps us to keep our own role in perspective.

There's a prayer that does the same thing for me. It has often been called the Romero Prayer, attributed to Oscar Romero, the archbishop of El Salvador who was murdered in 1980. I have recently learned that it was actually written by priest and author Ken Untener and prayed by John Cardinal Dearden in November 1979, during a homily at a mass for deceased priests. Whatever its origins, its power remains. Here is that prayer:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

*The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,
it is even beyond our vision.*

*We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction
of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.
Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying
that the kingdom always lies beyond us.
No statement says all that could be said.
No prayer fully expresses our faith.
No confession brings perfection.
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.
No program accomplishes the church's mission.
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.*

*This is what we are about.
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted,
knowing that they hold future promise.*

*We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.*

*We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation
in realizing that. This enables us to do something,
and to do it very well. It may be incomplete,*

*but it is a beginning, a step along the way,
an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.*

*We may never see the end results, but that is the difference
between the master builder and the worker.*

*We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs.
We are prophets of a future not our own.*

Amen.

We of 21st-century North America are a culture of the quick fix, of immediate gratification, of instant messaging and fast food. We are an impatient people. History is not on the side of people such as us.

Of all the gifts we've received from our partnership with sisters and brothers in Cuba, one of the greatest has been their spirituality of patience. It's a lesson I need to learn over and over. Things take time. Change takes time. No tiny mustard seed turns into a huge tree overnight.

Among my favorite biblical passages is the 11th chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews. It begins, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." From there, it describes the great "cloud of witnesses," citing examples of faithfulness among our ancestors: Abraham and Sarah, Miriam and Moses, Rahab and David, and the thousands of unknown people who suffered torture and imprisonment and death because of their faith.

The chapter ends with these words: "Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect."

Even better, according to God, than completing some great work, is knowing that you're in the company of people who will pick it up and carry it forward—for generations. Apart from *us*, the work of those great giants in the faith remains incomplete. And we can trust that others will carry it forward after us.

So let us take to heart those final words of our Call to Worship, which we proclaimed just minutes ago: "It is no sin to leave some things for our children—and to God." Amen.