

Title: Planting Seeds

Let us pray.

Most holy God, the people of Jacob were called to bring the world to you and in their midst you sent your son; may the good news of Christ burn in our hearts and spread throughout the world, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

My first gig in the Diocese of Northern California was a three-month interim at Vacaville. My first regular gig was a yolk of Gridley and Willows. I drove along many rice fields in those days. I put almost as many miles on the car as Bishop Lamb.

This was also a time when rice straw burning was beginning to phase out. The smoke was bad in Willows. When the rice farmers were burning, I could barely see across the street. I could see smoke in my office. It wasn't well insulated. It was not healthy.

The people of Willows didn't seem to mind. It was: well it must be fall, because the town is full of smoke. It was like that there for many, many years. And even for those not directly involved with rice farming, there were many indirect links of the people of Willows to rice farming. There were several rice farmers in the congregation.

The farmers were very adamant that flooding their fields in the winter would produce disease and lower the yield of their crops. Their complaints fell on deaf ears in Sacramento. The best way to have healthy, high yield harvests was burning. Well, healthy for the crops maybe, but not so healthy for anyone else. Some farmers started planting cotton.

The problem is what to do with the straw. Rice or wheat straw might be good for adobe but has very little use. It can be used for animal feed but must be treated so it can be more easily digested. Straw has always been used as bedding for people and animals. Baby Jesus was likely placed on straw, at least that is what our crèche scene depicts.

In the Sacramento Valley, rice is planted by a plane dropping seed on a flooded field. Such a company that does that was owned by a Willows parishioner. His legs were banged up from a few less than perfect landings.

When you are flying low, dropping seed, you need to know where the power lines are. This is also how the fields were fertilized and how they got fungicides.

Further south there are some wheat fields. Except for draining a rice field, the wheat harvest is basically the same as rice. The grain must be separated from the ear. Large machines do this very efficiently. The chaff is returned to the soil.

Then we moved to the foothills – no rice fields. Apple Hill is a big deal in El Dorado County and there are a variety of orchards, but the major crop is grapes, like Amador County.

I have a stole that has on one side a depiction of a bunch of grapes and the other side an ear of wheat. It is my first stole. Of course, they represent the bread and wine that we share during the Eucharist. They are symbols of a priest.

The reason they are symbols of a priest is that they were the staples of an ancient Mediterranean diet. Most meals were bread and wine. Occasionally fish or meat was added. It was these two staples, bread and wine, that Jesus used when he said that the bread was his body and the wine was his blood. It was at Emmaus that Jesus became known in the breaking of the bread.

Jesus was likely never a farmer. He was likely trained as a carpenter like Joseph. That was what was done in those days, in that culture. The family trade was passed on for many generations. I was never a rice farmer, but I was on a rice field during harvest. I saw how it was done. I was never a grape farmer, but I make wine at home.

By the same token, Jesus knew about wheat and grape farming without ever being a wheat or grape farmer. The people Jesus talked to were not all wheat and grape farmers, but they knew about it because it was everywhere in the Galilee area. Most wheat farmers ground their own seed to make and sell flour. Most grape farmers crushed and made their own wine for sale. There were some, but few middle businesses.

Mediterranean agriculture was a common language for all peoples who lived in the Mediterranean area. It was a language understood by the people of the

Galilee and it was a language understood in Greece, Asia Minor, and Rome. We might say that Jesus taught and preached in a universal “language understood by the people.” (From the first Book of Common Prayer by Thomas Cranmer)

Many of Jesus’ parables were agricultural parables. A parable is a short story that conveys an ethical or theological principle. Today we get two parables.

It is unlikely that Jesus told his parables in the order and in the scenes depicted in the gospels. Jesus’ parables are rare in John. Mark heard the stories, likely from Peter, and wrote them down. Mark may have also rearranged them to fit the way he wanted to tell about Jesus’ ministry. The intent may have been to portray Jesus as a sage.

The first of the two is the Parable of the Growing Seed. As Jesus often does, this parable illustrates what the kingdom of God looks like. Jesus was giving them and now us a portal into a world that God wants for us, called the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God looks like someone scattering seed on the ground. This person is doing this by hand, not by plane. Well, this crazy seed sprouted and grew. A miracle!

This farmer just needed to throw it around on, presumably, fertile ground. Each day, the farmer could see this very gradual growth. Jesus says it is the earth that produces the stalk, then the head, and then the grain. After all, the seed is in the ground, in the earth. It must be the earth that has something to do with this. When the grain is ripe, the farmer uses his sickle to harvest the grain.

That’s it. That’s the parable. It’s what everyone either does or observes every year. The kingdom of God is brought into being by a wheat farmer.

Then Jesus shares the Parable of the Mustard Seed. What is the kingdom of God like? The mustard seed is really small, about one to two millimeters in diameter. In preparing for this sermon, I discovered a little bit of trivia about mustard seeds. They are also called eye of newt. Think about that in a recipe that calls for mustard seed. “Add mustard seed and then boil and trouble.”

Jesus calls the mustard seed the smallest of seeds. Yet from that small seed come these great shrubs that even birds can make their nests in the shade.

I don't know if it was this passage or another about a mustard seed that I preached on, but one of the Willows people told me that mustard does not grow into shrubs. They look more like flowers and they are all over the medians of I-5. I had no answer. I didn't know anything about mustard plants. Maybe Jesus was exaggerating. Her family were rice farmers, by the way.

Quite a few years later, I remembered that conversation and did some research. Middle Eastern mustard plants were, indeed, shrubs. It turns out that there are many varieties of mustard beyond that found as an I-5 weed.

Mark implies that there were many more parables that Jesus preached that Mark did not include in his gospel and that Jesus only spoke to the people in parables. Yet it was only the disciples who were given the meaning of the parables. For only a few exceptions, the gospel writers never share Jesus' meanings of his parables. The gospel writers leave us to guess. Maybe it's a scam to employ preachers.

So, here are my best guesses for the meanings of these two parables. These parables were given to describe the kingdom of God. I believe Jesus was sharing these to spur people to change society into the kingdom of God. They do not describe heaven. They describe a future earth. Jesus wanted people to do more than walk away saying, "That would be nice," and give no more thought about it. We are supposed to do something about it.

Both in business and the church people "plant seeds." In other words, an idea is shared and the person who shares the idea waits to see if it catches on. I discovered, the hard way, that I could gage the readiness of a congregation to do something if I just mentioned the idea to a few people and wait and see what happens. I really didn't care if someone else wanted the credit for the idea.

Both of these parables are about sowing seeds. If I am right about the seed planting metaphor, then Jesus is talking about how the good news can grow. If I am right, the Parable of the Growing Seed is akin to planting a seed or an idea and then sitting back and watching it grow.

This would be true of the gospel. Share the gospel with others and watch it grow. Sleeping and waking are part of the life of the evangelist. Mark may have thought of himself as the farmer. Once the gospel has matured where it was planted, then those who have matured are ready to be harvested into the church. The kingdom of God arrives when all have a mature understanding of the gospel. We still wait.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed is similar to the Growing Seed parable. The mustard seed is not wild. It is sown. This parable is about scale. The very tiny mustard seed, becomes a might shrub, which seems like hyperbole but that's the way it is. Once the gospel is sown in an individual, it grows to tremendous size that even nature will find the person creature-friendly, kind of like Francis of Assisi.

I don't know if Mark intended these two parables to be linked together. But if we did, it might mean that maturing mustard could, in turn, sow the seeds of their maturing faith, thereby growing a gospel focused community.

Sunday attendance grew during my time at Willows from an average of twelve to sixteen. It may be about twelve now. Yet they are still there. The gospel is preached and the sacraments are celebrated.

I think that having a full-time priest here would be a universal or near universal desire. Yet that is not in the cards, at this time. Yet the gospel is preached and the sacraments are celebrated.

The seeds are planted. The good news will grow. We don't always get to pick how that growth happens. The good news in Christ is too good to be left fallow. Allow Christ to grow in yourselves, planting the gospel seeds that may spread elsewhere in Amador County. This is done by reflecting God's love in any place you may find yourselves.

Text: **Mark 4:26–34** (NRSV)

²⁶ He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷ and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸ The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹ But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

³⁰ He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³² yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

³³ With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴ he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples. ¹

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (Mk 4:26–34). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.#