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Wilmington, North Carolina
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The Lord's Day, February 18, 2018

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Seasons of the Kingdom
Mark 4:26-29

I come from a long line of farmers.

My father ran an auto repair garage and wrecker service for many years. But he also had a small farm. He got out of farming in the early 1980s, when farmers had to go into it really big, or get out of it. Like so many small farmers, he couldn't afford to go big, so he got out. But he still loved working his vegetable garden, up until the year he died!

My grandfather was a Baptist minister. But like many preachers of his day, he was bi-vocational. Through the years, he did different things alongside his ministry, but for many years, the "bi-" in his bi-vocational was *farming*.

And his father, my great-grandfather, was also a farmer.

I have some fond memories of farming. I never was crazy about working in tobacco. But I did love to disc and plow to get the fields ready for planting. It always gave me such a feeling of accomplishment to turn a field.

It's sad, in a way, that so many folks know so little about farming today. They have a hard time relating to it.

I read some time back that as late as 1885, on average, American households *produced* 80 percent of everything they consumed—food, clothing, energy sources, building materials, tools, and more. By 1915, on average, American households *purchased* 80 percent of what they consumed from outside. That percentage would be even higher today.¹

Through the centuries, farming of one kind or another was something most cultures, including ours, understood. That's changed now in our culture, where most of us get our produce from the grocery store or farmers' market rather than the field and our milk from a cooler rather than a cow.

There's almost a ritual rhythm to farming, a seasonal sequence—prepare in winter, plant in spring, cultivate in spring and summer, and harvest in late summer and fall. I always enjoyed watching the transformation of a field as the soil was turned and all the weeds and stubble were hidden. Then after planting, the tiny plants would poke their heads through the dirt. They'd be so green against that rich, dark Columbus County soil. Those plants would grow, and Daddy would carefully treat them with just the right amount of fertilizer and chemicals at just the right times. He'd carefully cultivate them (he never trusted me to do that part). Finally, the crop would grow to maturity, and the harvest would come.

"The kingdom of God is like . . ."

Throughout His ministry, Jesus talked about the kingdom of God more than anything else. Time and time again, Jesus would say, "The kingdom of God is like so-and-so," and then He'd tell a parable.

Now God's kingdom is His rule and reign in the life of His people and over the universe He has created. Sometimes it's hard for us really to get a handle on what the kingdom is. Maybe that's why Jesus used so many parables to describe it.

Unfortunately, despite all the parables about the kingdom that Jesus gave us, we still have trouble understanding what it's really like.

We want to think that the kingdom is a lot like *manufacturing*, don't we?—that we can take our patterns and templates and raw materials and go to work, producing the product of God's rule here on earth. We like to think that if we just have enough skill and expertise and resources, and the right people, we can, as one of my seminary teachers used to put it, “bring the kingdom in by Thursday next.”²

Or sometimes we like to think that the kingdom is like a *business*. If we just implement certain measures, if we take certain steps, kingdom and church work will prosper, and each successive year will be better than the previous one—higher attendance, more baptisms, bigger offerings, maybe even a building program of some kind.

But then we hear Jesus tell *this* parable.

Describing the kingdom

Jesus loved to use farming and harvest to describe the kingdom of God. He told story after story that used these kinds of images. In fact, of the four parables Mark gives us in this chapter, *three* use the farming image directly, and the other one talks about an item the ancient farmer would have used—a bushel basket.

This parable is simple and straightforward. The kingdom of God—God's rule and reign—is like a man (a farmer) who throws seed on the ground. As he goes about his daily routine, sleeping at night, rising during the day, in a way he doesn't understand, the seed sprouts and grows. Then the earth, in time, produces by itself (the Greek uses the word from which we get “automatic”) first the blade, then the ear or head, then the full grain in the head. And when the grain is ripe, the man puts in the sickle and reaps, because the harvest has come.

What does He mean?

But what does Jesus *mean* by all this?

New Testament scholars tell us that most of the time, though not all the time, Jesus' parables had one key point, one central focus.

Well, what's the focus of this parable? Is it the man, as he sows and reaps, that's like the kingdom? Or is it the seed the plant grows from? Maybe it's the earth, that somehow automatically, all by itself, produces the plant. Or is it the process as a whole?

Isn't it really the whole picture? Isn't Jesus telling us that in ways beyond our understanding or ability, *God grows the kingdom*, that it depends on Him, not us, and that it comes in His time and His way and by His power?

Jesus had at least one disciple who was committed to bringing the kingdom in by force (Simon the Zealot). Judas Iscariot, who would betray Him, seemed to have similar sympathies. Was this a word directed especially to them, to stress to them that the kingdom would *not* be brought in the way they wanted to bring it in? Maybe.

The church Mark was writing his account of the Gospel to was likely living under Emperor Nero's rule, and things were anxious. About eight years into his fourteen-year reign, things were going fairly well. But then something happened. Nero snapped mentally. When there was a major fire in the city of Rome, some people began to circulate a rumor that somehow Nero

caused it, maybe even started it. To deal with this rumor, Nero decided to blame the fire and anything else bad that was happening in Rome on the Christians there. According to the Roman historian Tacitus, many Christians were arrested and persecuted. Some were tortured, others were dressed in fresh animal skins and thrown into the arena with dogs or lions or other beasts to be killed. Some were crucified. And some were even used as human torches, covered in tar or pitch, tied up on poles and set on fire to give light to Nero's evening parties in his gardens.³

With this kind of thing going on, or about to go on, you can imagine that the Christians in Rome, for whom Mark was likely originally writing this, were wondering when the kingdom was going to come. When would Jesus return, as He had promised? Was Mark including this parable in order to say to them, "Be patient. God is working, and will bring the kingdom"? Probably.

But this is God's word *to us today* as well. What's it saying to *us*? One writer has put it this way: the kingdom of God "is a divine act, not a human accomplishment."⁴ That's it, isn't it? *The kingdom is God's doing, not ours!*

Now does this mean we don't have any responsibility in the work of God's kingdom? Of course not! The New Testament is clear that we have the responsibility to bear witness, to scatter the seed of the kingdom, to minister faithfully with the gifts and abilities and resources God has given us. Paul in particular reminds us more than once that we will all give an account of the deeds we have done in the body. Surely that will include what we've done in the work of God's kingdom!

What the point of this parable does mean is that what we're responsible for is *not* to produce results, but rather *to be faithful in witness and ministry*. When we've done what God calls us to do, then we leave the results to Him.

As much as farming has changed in the past 60 years, one thing remains the same—no matter what the farmer might do to enhance and encourage it, he simply cannot *make* a crop grow! All the fertilizer and irrigation in the world are no good if the crop just isn't making this year!

It's like that in the work of God's kingdom, too. In 1 Corinthians 3:6, Paul says that he planted and Apollos watered, but it was *God* who gave the increase. We sow, we water, we cultivate. But the growth of the kingdom, the making of the harvest depends on God, not us!

Humbling . . . and liberating!

Now friends, that's *humbling*—especially for pastors and other leaders. When things are going well, it's tempting to think that it has something to do with *our* preaching or *our* teaching or *our* leadership or *our* efforts. And God does use those things, and expects us to give our very best to Him in them. But the *credit* for any real growth or accomplishment has to go to *Him!* *He* made us, *He* called us, *He* gave us our gifts for ministry. It's all due to *Him*, *His* purpose, *His* grace, *His* gifts and power. That's *humbling*.

But it's also *liberating!* It reminds us that we can be faithful, trusting God to produce the results *in His time and way*. Even when it appears that nothing is happening, we don't know what God may be doing *beneath the surface* in people. He may be providing the nourishment that's needed to bring forth kingdom fruit in them. He may be quietly preparing them for a mighty movement of His Spirit. He may be working to teach us to trust Him even when He seems silent or we can't feel Him with us. Even when it looks to our eyes like nothing of value is going on, we can be sure that the harvest will come in due time—God's time.

My problem is that I want to see *instant* results! I've grown so accustomed to instant access and instant messaging that I want the kingdom to come *instantly!*

But it *doesn't*. The kingdom is *like farming*. What farmer would plant today, then give up on

his crop a week later? No, he waits for the harvest to come, patiently persevering in the confidence that it *will* come.

But I'm often more like the great minister Phillips Brooks. He was pacing anxiously one day, and someone said, "What's the trouble, Mr. Brooks?" He replied, "The trouble is that I'm in a hurry, but God isn't!"⁵

Waiting for the harvest . . .

Do you remember the story of William Carey, the first Baptist missionary? Back around 1790, he shared his burden for missions with his fellow Baptists in England, finally leading to the establishment of "The Particular Baptist Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Amongst the Heathen" in 1792. When the society was established, they asked Carey to go to India as the first missionary. He agreed. But did you know that he preached for *seven years* before he saw his first convert?

Maybe you've heard the story of Adoniram and Ann Judson, who set out with Luther Rice as Congregational missionaries. As they studied their Bibles on their long voyage from America to Burma, they became convinced of the importance of believer's baptism and landed there as Baptists. Of course, they no longer had support from the Congregational churches, so Luther Rice returned to the United States and traveled up and down the eastern seaboard visiting Baptist churches to raise prayer and financial support for the Judsons. But did you know that the Judsons labored in Burma in great isolation for *seven years* before they saw any fruit?

Did you know that the first missionaries in western Africa waited *fourteen years* before they saw any harvest? It was *nine years* in New Zealand. And in Tahiti, it was *sixteen years!*⁶

But the harvest came, in due season. And it will for us as well, in God's time, in God's way, by God's power, not ours, *as a divine act, not a human accomplishment.*

Some years will be better than others. Sometimes we'll baptize many, sometimes few. Some years resources for ministry will be bountiful, other years they may be limited, from a human perspective (but they're always unlimited when we truly trust God). Sometimes it will seem as though we are, as the great British Baptist preacher C. H. Spurgeon once put it, "plowing the rock." And sometimes God's blessing will be so abundant that we'll wonder how we'll handle it.

But the question that we will still keep having to struggle with in the midst of it all is simply this: Will we patiently wait for God's time, for *the seasons of the kingdom?*

†MEG

¹ Michael W. Kruse, *Kruse Kronicle: Household: Recovering the Family Business*, 10/26/2007; accessed 2/9/2009 at http://krusekronicle.typepad.com/kruse_kronicle/2007/10/household-recov.html.

² Dr. Bob Dale, formerly Professor of Church Administration, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

³ Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963/1979), 1-2.

⁴ *Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971).

⁵ "Waiting with Patience," *Our Daily Bread*.

⁶ "Waiting with Patience," *Our Daily Bread*.