

“What Are You Planting?”

Reading: Ezekiel 17:22-24; 2 Corinthians 5:1-21; Mark 4:26-34

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

Jesus said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.” Again He said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”

Jesus often used good, earthy, agricultural stories to describe the kingdom of God and the work He was doing. That makes sense, since the vast majority of people He would have been preaching to would have been farmers. There are several parables like these in which Jesus uses seeds in particular as His illustration. And again, that makes sense. Even in our industrialized world today, almost all of us know something about seeds, even if you’re not a farmer or a gardener. Seeds are all around us. My gutters right now are clogged with maple seeds; our maple trees have had quite a prolific spring this year in the Poconos. And surely when you were a child you discovered the joy of picking a dandelion and blowing its fluffy seeds into the wind.

But today Jesus focuses our attention on the mystery of seeds. I’m sure that modern science has explained a great deal about what exactly is going on in the biochemistry of a seed, and even in ancient times they had at least some understanding of the conditions seeds needed for producing plants and fruit. But even so, even though our planet is literally covered with plants, there’s something mysterious and even miraculous in that transformation from a seed to a plant. There’s that nagging feeling that surely this can’t work, surely this tiny, hard little speck can’t turn into a lush, fruitful plant, even though we’ve all seen it happen many times. And when it happens, again, even though we’ve seen it many times before, there’s a feeling of joy and energy.

The work of God in our lives and in our world is like that. Many people have tried quantifying it and explaining it, and in recent years many authors have written many books full of guaranteed tactics for growing your church, but in the end it’s still mysterious and miraculous when God grows the seed of His kingdom. You can cultivate what you think are absolutely perfect conditions for germination and you can still get nothing, and on the other hand you can find a thriving plant in the middle of a bone-dry desert where nothing has any sense in surviving, because ultimately it is God who brings life and growth and fruit. A church may struggle and gasp and die in spite of seemingly doing all the right things, and a soul may suddenly spring to life in faith in spite of all the odds being stacked against it.

That’s not to say that we should be fatalistic about things, that what will be will be and we don’t have free will and nothing we do matters. There are certainly things we can do to cultivate and nourish the soil of our lives and our church and our community. We can’t simply do nothing and then blame God if nothing happens. But these parables from Jesus remind us that God does not always work in predictable ways, and the ways of God’s kingdom cannot easily be forced into molds or limits or schedules. Jesus focuses our thoughts on one question, really: what seeds are you planting? The

growth of the seed is not always in your control, and the timing of the harvest isn't always predictable, but one thing you can count on is that you will reap whatever you sow. You will not get a tomato from a pepper seed, and you will not get a mustard plant from parsley seeds. So what are you planting in your life and in your world? Because whatever you plant is what you're going to get.

I focus us on this question for several reasons. First of all, we're the kind of people who prefer to have control over things, and we sometimes make the mistake of thinking that God needs us to build His kingdom for Him, and so it's all up to us to do everything. And isn't God lucky to have us, we might think. But no, God is king of His kingdom, and He is the one building it, and though He invites us to participate in His work, it is *His* work. The success of His kingdom comes from Him, not our skills or goodness or persistence. But at the same time, we do plant some seeds. God is the real sower of the seeds of His kingdom, but we plant a few ourselves, too, and we don't always stop and think carefully about the seeds we're planting. So what are *you* planting?

We don't always stop and think. What you plant is what you'll harvest, and we don't always plant carefully. The seeds that the world would encourage you to plant are not always the seeds that God's kingdom calls you to plant. Our world values success, as measured by any number of metrics, and so we often plant accordingly. I might plant seeds that will help me climb the ladders of society, seeds that will harvest wealth or fame or beauty or power. Those aren't necessarily bad things, but if that's what you plant for, that's all you'll get. If you spend your time and your energy and your relationships and your skills gaining those things, then those things are all you'll have. Or other people plant seeds of comfort; they just want a comfortable life where they don't have to worry about anything or be challenged by anything or, frankly, think too hard. If that's what you plant, that's all you'll get. Or maybe some people plant seeds for pleasure, and they shape their lives and focus their thoughts and their resources around what makes them feel good. If that's all you plant, you'll never get anything more than that.

The contrast is the kingdom of God, where the tiniest, most unlikely seed can produce some of the largest fruit. The seeds that the world counts as least valuable can, in the hands of God, be of eternal value. We might look at some of the seeds planted by the founders of the Pilgrim Holiness Church, which is one of the denominations that formed our denomination today, and is the heritage of this congregation. The early leaders of the Pilgrim Holiness Church went out and beat the bushes looking for people that the world forgot about or ignored or abused and used up. They went out to the docks and the brothels and the alleys looking for people who needed to hear the good news of a God who can grow seeds that bear eternal fruit even in dead soil. Or the founders of this congregation, who cared about investing the word of God into the lives of their families, who wanted to plant seeds of holiness and prayer and transformation and new life in the Spirit of God here in the Poconos, and we are continuing to bear fruit from the seeds they planted and God grew. The seeds that the world values, on the other hand, may produce fruit, but they usually give you your fruit and then leave you empty handed in the end, or their sweet-looking fruits end up tasting surprisingly bland or bitter, and they certainly don't bear fruit for eternity. The seeds that you plant are the seeds you will harvest; what are you planting?

We read a couple of different passages of Scripture, neither of which deals with seeds explicitly, but they definitely point us in the direction of the seeds that God values and wants us to plant and that He helps to grow. We read a few verses out of the prophecy of Ezekiel, who lived

hundreds of years before Jesus during a time when God's people were living through political turmoil and were being taken into exile. The rest of that chapter has a pretty specific application; Ezekiel is preaching against the politicians and leaders among his people who want to break their covenant with one nation and make a military alliance with another in the hope that they can get a better deal. It would seem to be a reasonable strategy from a political standpoint, but the reality is that they're sowing seeds of pride and arrogance. Rather than trusting in their God and listening to His instructions, they're trying to sort things out themselves by thinking they can out-manuever God's intent for them and outsmart the nation they're betraying. And Ezekiel tells them that no, you're going to receive the fruit from the seeds you've sown. He uses the image of an eagle plucking a branch off of a lofty tree, taking it and planting it elsewhere, and God will grow the remnant that He chooses. "All the trees of the forest will know that I the LORD bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it," He says.

The seeds you would expect to flourish are not necessarily the ones God values. And so we see here in Ezekiel that one of the qualities God values, one of the seeds God nourishes, one of the plants God loves to bring to eternal fruit, is humility. The seed of humbly trusting in God's intentions and God's ways and God's wisdom is something that the world will never understand, but that God can bring to glorious fruit. The willingness to set aside your own selfishness or ambition for long enough to listen to God's way instead, or the willingness to shape your actions based on the needs of others rather than just yourself, is mighty in God's hands.

We also read the fifth chapter of 2 Corinthians, a powerful chapter that speaks of the hope we have in Christ. We read this because it is just one of the many places where we see that God grows seeds that are characterized by resurrection hope. Paul speaks of the difference between our "earthly tent" and our "eternal house in heaven," and he's not just talking about going to live in heaven when we die. No, "we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life." He's talking about our bodies being resurrected and made new by the work of God. And so we plant seeds of resurrection, looking forward in hope and trust in what God will do to make things right. But more than that, Christ has "committed to us the ministry of reconciliation," this task of sowing seeds that bring together those who are scattered, inviting into relationship those who are isolated, and offering forgiveness to those who are broken. "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors," Paul says.

What this means is that God is looking for us not merely to plant seeds of being nice people or good people, or even being nice and good to other people. God is looking for us to plant seeds of humility, rightly trusting in Him, and also planting seeds of resurrection hope, pointing to God's great work of making all things right when His kingdom comes fully. We plant seeds in our lives that point to one who is greater than we are, and who also gives us a hope greater than death itself. So once again: what are you planting? When your life bears fruit, what sort of fruit will it yield? Will it be fruit grown through your own effort, or through the power and presence of God Himself? Will it be fruit that benefits only yourself and has a limited shelf life, or will it be eternal fruit for God's kingdom?

These are questions for us as individuals and us as a church body. The seeds we plant bear fruit both in our inner lives and our lives with others. Planting seeds of humility and resurrection hope have an impact on your life with God by drawing you nearer to Him and making you more like Him.

But we also plant seeds in our relationships and our social lives. We are Christ's ambassadors. The interactions we have with others, the conversations we take part in, the ways we go about our work, the friendship and kindness and forgiveness and encouragement that we offer others, all have the potential to bear fruit. There are no seeds too small. You never know what great things God might do through your smallest act of humility or hope done for someone else.

The good news is that it's never too late to replant your garden, because in this case you're relying on God's power and God's timing rather than the sun and the rain and the soil. So even if you have spent a lifetime planting in a way that does not honor God, planting seeds that will not bear good fruit, there is hope. You can turn to God's ways any time, and the hope of resurrection is an eternal hope that has no expiration date. Even if the garden of your life is overgrown with weeds and seeds that you planted ages ago, it's not too late. So what are you planting? What seeds are revealed by your actions and your priorities? What fruit will be borne by your life? What are you planting?



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