

## It's a mystery to me

Mark 4:26-32

June 18, 2006

Many of you know that Lynne and I enjoy gardening. We keep two large gardens in our backyard. One is an herb garden with some thirty different varieties of ornamental and culinary herbs: rosemary and lemon thyme, hyssop and sage and lavender and winter savory and five different mints. The other is a vegetable garden with carrots and beets, garlic and onions and squash, beans, tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, lettuce and radishes. We dry herbs, can vegetables, and make our own salsa and pesto and vinegars.

We have learned about gardening and about preserving the harvest by doing, by reading, and by listening to the advice of gardening friends ... because I never planted a seed growing up. My Mom planted some flowers each summer, but our family didn't grow any vegetables or herbs. So when Lynne and I moved to Maine in our third year of marriage, I knew nothing at all about gardening.

But there, in Scarborough, Maine, the son of our landlady invited us to plant a small corner of the large vegetable garden he tended behind her old farmhouse, and so we did. I still remember my utter amazement -- and great delight -- when those first green radish leaves started appearing above the surface of the soil. I was stunned that a real living plant was coming up from where I had buried those tiny seeds just a few days before! I knew it was supposed to happen that way. I was expecting that it would happen that way. But still, when it did happen ... wow!

I am still delighted, and amazed, each summer as I watch our gardens grow. Those little tomato seeds I start in flats in the basement in March develop into the six-inch seedlings I plant out into the garden in May and become by August the six-foot plants with thick vines going everywhere that I must work to restrain. And the fruits! So many and so good! Large, juicy, delicious, nutritious tomatoes!

It's a mystery to me, how it all happens. There are a few things that I can do: plant the seeds, pull the weeds, prune the vines, water the plants if there is insufficient rainfall, but mostly, I just watch. I put the seed in the ground and several months later I pick the ripe tomatoes off the vine, but, in between, I mostly watch. I watch it happen. It just happens!

The growth of a plant. The birth of a child. The growth of a child into an adult with a mind and heart and spirit all her own. The mysterious line where life ends and death begins. The mysterious line where life begins. The wonder that life is there at all. It's all a mystery to me.

I know some of the science, not all of it, but even if I knew all there is to know about biology, about botany, about human development, it would still be a mystery to me. We may be able to grasp some of the mechanics, but how do we grasp the miracle of life itself, that this collection of atoms lives and breathes and grows and moves and thinks and feels and loves and hopes and believes? We can only watch. We watch it happen. It's all a mystery, a great wonder and a source of great delight. It's a thing we cannot fully understand, but a thing we are blessed to witness and to enjoy.

Jesus was telling people about the Kingdom of God, about the world, the new world, the world made new, that the grace of God would bring into being. Jesus told them

parables, stories. Some think he was trying to keep them confused. Some think he was trying to leave the power and joy of discovery with them. I think that some things are so full of mystery and so full of wonder that you can't begin to tell about them except through stories, except through parables, except through word images that can do no more than hint at the reality itself.

*How can I tell you what the Kingdom of God is like? It's like ... this:*

*A man scatters seed in his field. He sleeps at night, is up and about during the day, and all the while the seeds are sprouting and growing. Yet he does not know how it happens ...*

*Or it's like ... this:*

*A man takes a mustard seed, the smallest seed in the world, and plants it in the ground. After a while it grows up and becomes the biggest of all plants!*

This is what the Kingdom of God is like: it happens! We don't know how it happens, but it happens. And when it does happen, all creation enjoys its blessings. People reap a good harvest; birds have a place to build their nests; the results are amazing!

The secrets of the coming of the Kingdom of God remain a mystery to us. There's not a lot for us to do. We plant the seeds, and one day we will enjoy the harvest. OK, maybe there are a few more things we can do along the way -- cultivating and pruning and watering -- but mostly, we just watch! We watch what God is doing, what God is bringing into being. We don't know how it happens, but it happens. The Kingdom of God is coming! Meanwhile, we plant seeds ...

Baptism is a seed. In baptism, we mark a child with water, we give over a child to God's loving care, we plant a seed of faith in expectation of what God can and will bring into being. We can't make faith grow in any child. We don't know how it happens, how God will touch her soul and bring it to life. We just plant the seed and watch.

OK, maybe there are a few more things we can do along the way -- teaching and correcting and sharing our own stories of faith -- but mostly, we just watch. We watch what God is doing, what God is bringing into being. We don't know how it happens, but it happens!

In baptism, we entrust our children to God, but not with our fingers crossed! It's not:

*I trust my children to you, Lord, but, of course, I realize that if they are going to be safe, if they are going to be well and do well, it's all up to me!*

Baptism is planting a seed. It reminds us of what we can do and what we cannot do. We are responsible to our children, but we are not responsible for our children. We plant the seeds, but God makes them grow.

And it happens. But not always the same way: sometimes a good harvest, sometimes a poor harvest, not without times of drought or disease or threatening pests. It happens, but when we plant the seeds, there are no guarantees.

But, wait! There is a guarantee! When we entrust our children to God, God will not abandon them! God's unconditional love will never leave them! They will be well. You can trust God to do it! How? It's a mystery to me, but it will happen. Just watch!