

*The Sleeping Gardener*

Rev. Martha ter Kuile

Minister of Worship & Pastoral Care

Bloor Street United Church

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***Reading:***

1 Samuel 15.34-16.13

Then Samuel went to Ramah; and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul. Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.

The LORD said to Samuel, 'How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.' Samuel said, 'How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.' And the LORD said, 'Take a heifer with you, and say, "I have come to sacrifice to the LORD." Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you.' Samuel did what the LORD commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, 'Do you come peaceably?' He said, 'Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.' And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, 'Surely the LORD's anointed is now before the LORD.' But the LORD said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.' Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, 'Neither has the LORD chosen this one.' Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, 'Neither has the LORD chosen this one.' Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, 'The LORD has not chosen any of these.' Samuel said to Jesse, 'Are all your sons here?' And he said, 'There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.' And Samuel said to Jesse, 'Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.' He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, 'Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.' Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his

brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

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There are many stories in the Bible that illustrate the contrast between what we might have predicted and what actually occurs. The story that Mary read of young David's anointing by Saul does the same trick of reversing our expectations - there God favours the hidden son, the one who is not there, is the smallest, the youngest. The one not even summoned by his father. It is this youngster that God surprisingly chooses to become the greatest. Partly a semi-historical narrative, but also a metaphor about what Walter Brueggeman means when he says that the strangest thing about the Old Testament is God. And that continues in the New Testament.

In both lectionary groups recently, we have talked about the difficulty some people have with the use of images and metaphors that we find so often in the Bible and in fact, in all religious talk. It's true that some of us just love the mental pictures which suggest but do not definitively state – but others are left frustrated. 'Are they being intentionally obscure?' comes the complaint. 'Why can't they just say what they mean?' And another person, recalling herself as a child – and you can just imagine an intelligent and serious six-year-old, filled with the desire for faith, standing in front of Jesus saying, 'I have looked in the pantry and discovered that the mustard seed is not the smallest of all the seeds. Celery seed is smaller, poppy seed is smaller. What did you mean?'

And Jesus replies, well, it was a metaphor.

So today we turn to the montage of metaphors in the Gospel of Mark:

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

*He also said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 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.'*

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

Mark 4.26-34

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It's an awfully busy time of year for gardeners. As the first flush of early spring flowers and flowering shrubs and trees fade, there is trimming and candling and edging to be done. Lots of detritus to be raked, annuals to be popped in, perennials moved, planters to be filled. Those who still have grass lawns have to put in a lot of overtime in June – if you turn your back, it will be up past your ankles. The weeds are making just as much progress as the flowers and grass and young veggies - perhaps more progress in this cool spring weather – and if you have patio stones or brick pathways, you'll know about nature's relentless urge to live and lift and push aside the assiduous efforts of these puny humans. So it's work, work, work, and isn't that what gardeners like?

The first parable that we read in the Gospel of Mark today doesn't seem to focus on the work, though – it draws our attention to another matter. As it is presented, this gardener, or farmer, simply scatters the seed – a straight forward task, not at all demanding apparently. No plowing, just scattering. And then the gardener sleeps, snoozing in the shade of a tree perhaps, or at home for a pleasant evening with friends. The gardener is completely inattentive while the plants sprout and grow – first the stalk, then the head, then the grain filling. And what Jesus appears to be saying is, just as the earth produces of itself, this also is the nature of the Kingdom of God. Happens while you are sleeping. Happens without you.

Now of course, we can see that it isn't all about just sleeping and letting something happen. If the gardener had spread gravel over the garden rather than seed, nothing much would have happened – so evidently the gardener has to begin with the right material. We have to know what to scatter. Often, even right within the Gospels the planting material is identified as the Word of God, and perhaps we could think of it as the precious insights and teachings that we find here.

And note this – there *is* work involved, once the harvest is ready. It's not the cultivation the gardener is called to, but the harvest. Now, we can imagine the little girl again – but what does that mean?

So many of Jesus' images of the kingdom or reign of God have this quality of abundance to them. The vine that just keeps growing, the loaves and fishes that

multiply through sharing, the overflowing fishnets, the water that gushes forth endlessly, an unbelievably lavish party. So we imagine disciples and followers, mostly Jewish, mostly working people. They are not well to do, not powerful – they're politically oppressed. And they hear Jesus say the reign of God is arriving. God's dominion is at hand.

And they say, *the kingdom of God*, you mean we'll overthrow the Romans? No.

Oh. *Plentiful harvest*, do you mean, we'll all be rich? No.

Oh. *Good shepherd*, do you mean, nothing will ever go wrong again? No.

The parables are recalcitrant to simple political or moralistic interpretation.

What I mean is, says Jesus, the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed .... spreading and growing into a bush large enough to shelter the birds. And they look at each other, what did he say?

Many years later, the Gospel writers tried to get the stories written down – they too try to piece it together - what did he say? A harvest? A tall shelter? A net full of fish? So you can see why they might want to reassure us, as Mark does in the last paragraph of this reading, that although Mark didn't manage to get all the explanations into the book, Jesus did tell them to the disciples, in private.

In private. So of course, we don't know what he said – yet looking around we can watch for some of the same somewhat unlikely truths. Truths that indicate that the harvest may be waiting for us already. In very practical matters. Here's an example from an anti-hunger website.

For example, consider the far-reaching implications of one well. Safe drinking water reduces the risk of water-born illness, a great contributor to hunger. A well provides irrigation for crops [sic – maybe a kitchen garden] that can diversify a family's diet. A nearby well can erase the need for people, often children, walking long distances to secure water, and have time to go to school. Literacy brings with it the potential to escape hunger and poverty. Out of a small well comes great possibility. The whole micro-credit movement is based on the same logic (<http://archive.elca.org/hunger/sermon-starters.asp>)

At a larger scale too, this matter of mysterious abundance applies to much more than what we call religion. At the Munk Debates last week I looked around at the crowd and wondered what had brought each of them to the ROM to hear a debate on

Foreign Aid. What did they come with and what would they take away? I wondered about how the messages from the four speakers might take root and have influence on policies and programs, and ultimately on history. What might be the impact of the young Zambian economist's plea to stop all aid to Africa? Did it make a difference that she was beautiful as well as articulate? Who would go away with Stephen Lewis's stirring phrases pushing them toward new engagement? And is it his rhetoric or his compassion that makes the difference? How do things change? What's the role of the media? How does a new idea gain currency and grow into a world-shaping movement? How does the world actually work?

The parables of Jesus elucidate a quality that is present in all life, and which we too often overlook: There is more going on than meets the eye, and it is often what doesn't meet the eye that matters most. Jesus says – watch for this, open your heart to it. When the time for the harvest has come, be ready.

Let us pray,

*Loving God, you have placed us in a wonderful garden, filled with more life and growth than we imagine. Open our hearts to the harvest which surrounds us. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.*