

SPR SERMON
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost 6.17.18

Rev. Julianne Buenting+
Mark 4:26-34

“If you’re not outraged, you’re not paying attention.” Yup.

I have spent the two weeks being outraged by news reports of children separated from their parents at our borders- my outrage compounded by the fact that today is Father’s Day, a holiday conjured to supposedly reflective of how much our society values family relationships. It would laughably ridiculous if this “policy” were not so witheringly cruel. I could go on with a lengthy litany of appall and horror, but I suspect that I am preaching to a group of folks who are as horrified as I, so I’ll refrain.

Not because I think that “just stop being horrified” is a legitimate response. Not for a minute. Instead, I want to consider how to hold our outrage and concern for children and families, and our general and specific dismays about horrible situations of injustice and inhumanity in our world with what Jesus is teaching his disciples in the parables in today’s Gospel.

We heard two short, simply parables about seeds as analogies for the kingdom of God. The first presents us with a lackadaisical sower who just throws some seed on the ground and goes about his business of living day in and day out. And while he is decidedly **not** paying attention, and clearly not doing a lot of mulching and watering and careful tending, something is happening. *“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 seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. I do not think that this is intended to be a parable about the limited knowledge of botany in Jesus’ day. Rather, this parable stimulates me to a change of perspective about what we cannot see and to trust in the growing of the kingdom of God.

This parable of the lackadaisical sower leads me to consider God’s kingdom operating beyond our immediate sight, and for me it is a welcome exhortation to trust and hope, even in the face of our outrage and dismay. While we are going about our lives, it seems to say, the **hidden grace** of the God is alive and active, even when we cannot see it.

Because the spiritual and theological downside of outrage comes from our all-too-human **negativity bias**, our “propensity to attend to, learn from, and use negative information far more than positive information.” (Psychol Bull. 2008 May; 134(3): 383–403.) From an evolutionary perspective, it makes sense that it is adaptive to pay more attention to danger and anger/aggression, and some suggest that our brains are hard-wired to that negativity bias. It will get us to act fast to get away from predators, be they roaming wild animals or scam artists out for our life savings.

Trust and hope in the hidden action of God's grace. That's the virtue that this parable recalls for me.

I would be dishonest if I did not acknowledge that there is a very real tension point here. Holy Scripture repeatedly cries out against injustice, systemic oppression, and cruelty to immigrants and refugees. So, our outrage is right on target, prophetic even.

Still, some of us may be reaching the point of outrage fatigue, with its attendant risk of cynicism and hopelessness. This may be especially so if we are holding firmly to the notion that we alone, in our finite humanness, have to contend with all that injustice and oppression and cruelty. The parable would indicate that the hidden grace of God is active and working even when we are not.

Notice the lackadaisical sower. His approach is the ultimate in "laissez-faire" gardening. Scatter the seeds and let them grow - the kingdom of God is like that, Jesus says. But notice also that that's not the conclusion of the parable.

"But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

Shifting the perspective to hope and trust in the unrelenting and hidden action of God's grace provides a helpful antidote for potential outrage fatigue. Through the lens of this parable, I see my role as one of scattering seeds and trusting in God's action to grow them- I know not how. Those seeds may be small, small as a mustard seed that grows to provide shade from the desert sun and a place where the birds may make their home.

They may be small seeds:

- of resistance to injustice,
- of protest against cruel treatment of families,
- of generous sharing with those in need of food and shelter and safety,
- of kindness and support extended to refugees,
- to name only a few possible examples.

Once we scatter those seeds, we let them grow by the hidden grace of God. And while we go about our daily lives, we pay can attend less to the negative and watch for the maturing of the grain. We look for the opportunity to participate in the harvest of the kingdom of God.

Trust and hope in the hidden grace of the growing kingdom of God.