

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
6/17/2012, The Third Sunday after Pentecost  
Mark 4:26-34  
Holy Farming

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>26</sup>And he said, “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, <sup>27</sup>and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how.

For a fellow like me, from farming country down on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, our Lord’s saying here rings very true. There is an inevitable air of mystery concerning farming. The farmer scatters the seed. If his harvest fails it will not be because of lack of labor, for farmers are usually hardworking people. No, if the harvest fails, it will be because of forces beyond the control of the farmer. And likewise, if the harvest succeeds, there will forever remain a sense of wonder and gratitude for it. When a farmer gives thanks for the harvest, it is earnest thanksgiving, springing from a heart that knows that in the end, all good things come from the hand of our heavenly Father:

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. (James 1:17, KJV)

## THE BAND

To an old guy like me, one of the greatest rock-and-roll movies of all time has got to be *The Last Waltz*, which was the 1976 farewell concert by a group called The Band. In an age of polka dots and bellbottoms and psychedelia, The Band simply went their own way. They were after something, as if driven to tell the story of America, especially of rural America.

Recently I enjoyed a documentary<sup>1</sup> about The Band which spent some time discussion one of their songs: “King Harvest.” It was interesting to listen to Robbie Robertson sit at the console and lift up certain musical aspects of the song. But it was even more interesting to hear him and others discuss the spirit of the song.

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<http://movies.netflix.com/WiPlayer?movieid=20753158&trkid=2361637&t=Classic+Albums%3A+The+Band>

They observed that for farming folk, the autumn harvest is the great time of the year. Come autumn, come fall, that's when life begins. It's not the springtime, but the fall, because that's when the harvest comes in. But the song "King Harvest" is about a failed harvest. This scared person whose farm has failed, who has run to the farmer's union for protection, you can listen to the worry and desperation in that farmer. "It's Steinbeck, it's Faulkner, it's classic American literature," says Bernie Taupin commenting on the song.

"The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, <sup>27</sup>and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, *he knows not how.*

My dentist once mentioned to me that though she lives in a small space, she insists upon planting flowers and vegetables in the window box and the little bit of ground available to her because she wants her children to see and to sense something of the holiness of the harvest.

The "Builder's Psalm" – Psalm 127 – speaks of the necessity for God to give his blessing to our labors:

Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain. (Psalm 127:1, KJV)

Likewise with the farmer: He scatters the seed, he sleeps and rises night and day, and God willing, the seed sprouts and grows "he knows not how."

## **YET WE MUST LABOR**

So, the harvest belongs to the Lord. Still, we must labor. That seems to be the will of the Lord -- that the harvest not come without *us*, without our part. We must scatter the seed, sleep and rise night and day, hoe the weeds, fertilize and irrigate if we can. And then when the harvest comes, we must hasten to fetch it into the barn. We cannot let it go to waste in the field.

Some beautiful things flourish without human help. Take wildflowers, for example. During our recent vacation to Spain, Carol took lots of photographs of wildflowers. She loves them. She takes them as living symbols of the grace of God – the way little spots of beauty adorn our world, through no labor of own.

Wildflowers grow without the laborer in the field. That is the mystery and beauty of wildflowers. They grow in the unlikeliest of places. Their existence is sheer grace. We chance upon them, and there they are, free to be enjoyed. We did not plant them. There was no sweat upon our brows from sowing the seed. We were just hiking, strolling along, and there they are! Splashes of color, delicate in structure, just freely living, and we get to enjoy them.

But if faith on earth is a sweet fragrance, like from a flower, it is not a wildflower. Rather, faith on earth comes from the work of the laborer in the field. It comes from the deliberate sowing of seeds.

That is what Jesus did. In his earthly ministry, he sowed the seeds of the kingdom. When people came to warn him about King Herod, about Herod wanting to kill him, Jesus takes the warning in stride undeterred from his work:

<sup>31</sup>At that very hour some Pharisees came, and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” <sup>32</sup>And he said to them, “Go and tell that fox, “Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course.” (Luke 13:31-32, RSV)

Jesus labored on, till his life was ripped away from him on the cross. He sowed the seeds of faith, he won hearts, he turned lives around, he won citizens for the greatest kingdom of them all: the Kingdom of God. He did what he could, and then commended himself and his work into the hands of his heavenly Father. You and I should do the same.

## **TWO MATTERS ABOUT WHICH TO BE CONFIDENT**

It seems to me that there are two matters about which we can be confident when it comes to sowing the seeds of the kingdom. First, our labors shall not be in vain. The Kingdom of God will indeed come. Our efforts might seem feeble to us, but we have a great God who is well able to accept our labors and use them for the building up of his kingdom. And the second matter is this: the seed of the kingdom has been planted in our own hearts, and so we are bound for glory. Let’s take these two points in turn.

### **FIRST, OUR LABORS SHALL NOT BE IN VAIN**

First, our labor to spread faith on earth shall not be in vain. We might not be powerful preachers, none of us, and yet we can all lend a hand to the creation of faith on earth. And sometimes, *we* are the ones to do it. There is something about our location, about our place in the world, about the people around us, and about our opportunities which make us the perfect ones to speak a word that might find a home in some human heart.

Our mighty God could simply instill faith on earth by fiat. He who called humanity into being could just as well plant faith in every human heart. But apparently, he does not want to do that – at least not yet. There will come a day when God himself will so teach the faith that the whole world will believe. That is the great promise of Philippians 2:

<sup>9</sup>Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, <sup>10</sup>that at the name of

Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup>and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11, RSV)

But till then, the Lord asks you and me to lend our hands to creating faith on earth. And we should be eager for the job in the sense that the sooner we can draw others to Jesus, the less time is wasted in life for them. After all, the truth of a path depends very much upon where it is heading. A path might be a lovely path in many respects, with flowers along the way and cool breezes and so on. But if it is heading toward hell, forget it! If we are going to end up bending the knee before Jesus and confessing that he is the Lord, then the sooner we get on the path toward him, the sooner life receives its proper orientation and the less time is wasted.

Again, you and I have an important role in raising up faith on earth. St. Paul was a mighty preacher, but he was mindful that he needed other preachers too. He needed each of us to somehow speak the words in our own situation that might well lead to faith in others. His logic is plain and convincing:

<sup>13</sup>For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” <sup>14</sup>But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? <sup>15</sup>And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” (Romans 10:12, NRSV)

This is what you and I can do, in our way: we can and ought to be sowers of the seeds of faith in others. We can try to touch the heart of others and to tell them about Jesus so that one day others will remember us and say to themselves, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.”

## **SECOND, THE SEED HAS BEEN PLANTED IN THE FARMER TOO**

My second point of confidence concerns the farmer: the seed of faith has been planted in you and me too – the ones called to scatter the seeds of faith abroad.

In ordinary farming, the farmer scatters the seed outside himself, not *in* himself. But when it comes to heaven’s farming, we may scatter the seed in confidence that that seed has taken root in our hearts too.

It is the gift of Baptism, for each of us. When the Pastor lays his hands on the head of the baby or grown-up and prays for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon that one, that is the moment with the seed of faith is planting in us. It *is* there, just waiting to flourish.

Martin Luther lived in a day and an age when everyone in those parts was baptized. It was Christendom. It was taken for granted that parents would have their children baptized. But, alas, as is sometimes the case, there were parents back then who had their children baptized, but did not really raise them in the faith of the church. For the parents, it was a formality, a custom. They had their children baptized, but did not raise them in faith. So that meant that there were baptized grown-ups who knew little of the faith of the church and were not really practicing their faith. If those folks should find Christ, they wondered whether they should be re-baptized. They wondered whether their first baptism was of no effect and that therefore they should begin again with a new baptism. Luther stood with the ancient tradition on that. He urged that there be no re-baptisms, but simply that the grown-up begin to enjoy a baptism that he or she received as an infant, but had fallen away from or had little chance to use until now:

Therefore Baptism remains forever. Even though we fall from it and sin, nevertheless we always have access to it so that we may again subdue the old man. But we need not again have the water poured over us. Even if we were immersed in water a hundred times, it would nevertheless be only one Baptism, and the effect and signification of Baptism would continue and remain. Repentance, therefore, is nothing else than a return and approach to Baptism, to resume and practice what had earlier been begun but abandoned. (Luther, *Large Catechism* on Baptism)

So it is with you and me. If we are baptized, there is a spark of faith in us waiting to grow stronger. Let us nurse it. Let the embers of faith grow strong into a great fire of love in our lives. Jesus himself dwells within us, seeking to become more and more the great Shepherd of our lives. Yield to him.

If you have fallen away in faith, even if you have backslid into some horrible sin, do not suppose that you are beyond help. The daily task of any Christian – from the highest saint to the lowliest and foulest sinner – is to greet the dawn with the intention of putting the old Adam, the old Eve to death this day and to rise up to live before God as a righteous person.

When we are asked to follow in the pattern of Jesus, scattering the seeds of the kingdom as we have a chance, know that we are not laboring for a gift that we ourselves shall miss out on. The Kingdom of God comes. As Luther says, it comes even without us.<sup>2</sup> But it comes, and you and I shall be part of it. All we are trying to do now is to get ready for it, to live in harmony with it, to let its love and peace and justice dwell in us even now, and to share that gift with others. So, scatter the

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<sup>2</sup> “*Thy kingdom come.*” What does this mean? Answer: To be sure, the kingdom of God comes of itself, without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may also come to us. (Luther’s *Small Catechism*)

good news of Jesus Christ, sleep and rise, day and night, and look forward in confidence to glory, through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.