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Mark 4:26-34
Farmers for God

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

²⁶He [Jesus] also said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. (Mark 4:26-27, NRSV)

We are city folk now, in a great city, but some of us were born and raised elsewhere. And for some of us, we will never really get the farm out of our blood. I remember years back, one of our former members took me out to a fancy restaurant, and was disappointed in how dull my tastes are. I do not drink wine, for example... know little about it. In exasperation, the fellow complained, “You’re such a farmer!” Well, I guess that’s true, though I should add that there are lots of farmers who have sophisticated taste in both food and intellectual matters.

Anyway, many New Yorkers moved here from elsewhere, and for some of us, we remember the farm. Good memories, often. To this day, we do not pick up a bottle of milk from the bin without remembering the life of the dairy farmer. We remember that the farmer is up at the break of day. After a couple hours of work, he comes back to the farmhouse for a big breakfast, and then back to work. How can he go on a vacation? Those cows always need to be milked! How can he pay for the expensive farm machinery? Well, maybe he can work out something with neighboring farmers so that they jointly own the combine and take turns using it.

Or we might remember the truck farm, as I remember my grandfather’s little farm. I remember the planting of the seeds, the careful movement of my grandfather’s hoe as he worked it around the young plants. I remember the vulnerability to market prices, so that we would load up the old Ford truck with the baskets of vegetables, take them to the farmer’s market, and patiently wait to find out what we would get. If there was drought that summer, our vegetables were stunted and humble compared to those of the farmers who could afford irrigation. But if there had been drought, who knows? Even our humble vegetables were worth something.

The farmer plants his seed, sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows, “he knows not how.” Amen to that! The farmer can read all the trade magazines he or she wants, but in the end, he “knows not how.” I bet he could even earn a doctorate in biochemistry, and still the growth of the crop will forever remain a mystery in some measure. And the farmer will often bow his or her head and give thanks to God if the harvest turns out to be a good one, for there are mysteries and uncertainties involved in raising crops.

IF WE BAPTIZED, WE BE FARMERS

Still, it is worthwhile to try to reckon with this practical fact: If the farmer does not sow the seed, he is not likely to get a crop. You and me: let us sow the seed! Let us sow the seed of faith on earth.

One aspect of the farmer's life is especially on my mind these days: the fact that the farmer does, and should, "sleep and rise night and day." This is an image of confidence in the growing season and patience for the crop to grow. Let me, then, lift up these two: confidence in the growing of the seed, and patience with the growing plants.

If we be baptized, then we be farmers. We are under the obligation to try to sow the seed of faith on earth. We end each baptism liturgy speaking of this. I think that young Grayson Tota was our most recent baptism here at Immanuel. When that little boy was baptized, I announced his new status as a *priest* and spoke of the obligations of his ministry:

Through Baptism God has made Grayson a member of the *priesthood* we all share in Christ Jesus, *that* we may proclaim the praise of God and bear his creative and redeeming Word to all the world.

And we welcomed the child to join us in our work:

We welcome you into the Lord's family. We receive you as a fellow member of the body of Christ, a child of the same heavenly Father, and a *worker* with us in the Kingdom of God.

There are great blessings connected with being baptized, yes, but also there are obligations. We are duty-bound now to be workers in the Kingdom of God. We are to be "bear his creative and redeeming Word to all the world." We are to be farmers for God, each of us.

And I bet we have been trying. As opportunity seemed right, we have tried to help others along toward that faith that is precious to us – faith in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We would not be without that faith for ourselves. Reality would look pretty unpromising to us without Jesus. Life is better with our Savior and we have wanted that for others too. So, we have sown the seeds of faith as best we could. We might have floundered around some at it, because we live in a world that tries to embarrass us into silence about Jesus. But I bet we have tried nonetheless. We have tried with our own children, we have tried with friends, maybe we have even tried with strangers if it looked to us that they could use a word of encouragement.

CONFIDENCE IN THE HARVEST

Well, if you have tried, then I want you to remember to “sleep and to rise night and day.” Entrust what you have done over to God, and get some sleep. Do not worry yourself sick over a harvest from your preaching. If you have tried to pass on the faith of the Church to your children, then “sleep and rise night and day.” The seed will grow, “you know not how.” Do not imagine that the success of your witness is entirely up to you. Remember that there is a God who is Lord of the harvest. There is a God who knows of the seed of faith you have tried to sow. There is a God who cares that you have tried to pass on his holy Word to others. So, give yourself some rest. Have mercy upon your own souls. And have confidence that they who labor in the Lord will not labor in vain. That’s one of my favorite verses these days: 1 Corinthians 15:58:

Therefore, my beloved [brothers and sisters], be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:58, RSV)

Expect a harvest from the seeds of faith you have sown. Do not sigh and think to yourself, “I have poured out my heart on behalf of Jesus, but I don’t think it is going to amount to anything.” Instead, remember the ancient promise of the Lord to his people:

¹⁰For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
¹¹so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it *shall not* return to me empty, but it *shall accomplish* that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10-11, RSV)

So, that is my first point: sleep and rise, day and night, knowing that the Lord fights on the side of your sowing of his Word.

PATIENCE WITH THE YOUNG CROP

My other point is not so much about confidence in the Lord of the harvest, but rather about our gentleness with the growing plants. It is encouragement for us to practice patience when we are trying to sow the seed of faith. Let us not be so hasty or harsh that we do harm to the young plants who are trying to grow in faith.

That is a temptation for the farmer, especially for the inexperienced farmer. He might sow his seeds, tend to the ground, worry that the crop doesn’t seem to be growing, and decide to plough the whole field under and plant anew. But if he does that too often, he will likely get no harvest at all.

Likewise with us: If we try to witness to others, but become impatient with what we judge to be their lack of progress, then we might damage them. We might ruin the faith that is in fact starting to develop in them, but which we do not yet see.

In fact, we should probably pray that Jesus will be patient with *us* in a similar manner. Compared to him, our faith is pretty immature. Even the faith of gray-haired saints of the church has a long ways to go to reach the fullness of the truth. So, we should pray for more time and more chance to grow.

Likewise, with people who are dear to us: We might find that they believe things that surprise us, even disappoint us. But let us not deal with them so harshly, with such a judgmental spirit, that we end up hurting the faith they in fact have.

I mean, all any of us can do is live a day at a time. Tomorrow we might be wiser than we are today. Tomorrow our faith might be more true, more impressive, more in line with the mind of Christ than it is now. But that's tomorrow! We are not there yet. We are simply living today, a day at a time. As good teachers are patient with the pupils, and as good parents are patient and gentle with their children, let us practice patience one toward another, even if we disagree about the progress we are each making in the faith.

JESUS

Finally, we must speak of our *reason* for confidence in the harvest. We must specify why we can take St. Paul at his word when he assures us that those who labor in the Lord will not labor in vain. The reason is Easter. The reason is Jesus. The reason is that the resurrection of Jesus means that nothing can stop him from working a great harvest from the seeds you and I have sown.

He once spoke of another seed – one that falls into the ground and dies:

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. (John 12:24, RSV)

You know the Gospel: Jesus himself is the preeminent grain of wheat that has fallen into the ground, indeed, into a tomb. But in dying, Jesus has won the right to make something of us and of our efforts on his behalf. So, let us sow the seeds of faith in his name. Let us be faithful farmers for him. Let us do what we can that there should be some more faith on this earth. And then, sleep and rise, day and night, and be confident of the harvest, through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever.