



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### **Pentecost 4 – Proper 6 Year B**

#### **Be Faithful, Keep Planting**

**[RCL]: Ezekiel 17:22-24; Psalm 92:1-4,11-14; 2 Corinthians 5:6-10,[11-13],14-17; Mark 4:26-34**

The lessons we read today seem to be mainly about planting. Most of us probably do not live on farms, but we might have some knowledge about the growth of plants.

We know that planting requires someone to sow the seeds. The seeds need to have soil, and the soil needs to be tilled and cultivated to allow the seeds to have space to germinate. There needs to be sufficient water and nutrients in the soil to nurture the seed. Therefore, people must apply water and fertilizer regularly in order for the seed to sprout into a small plant, gradually grow branches and leaves, and then bear fruit.

This seed-sowing and plant-growing seem to be simple and straightforward. Nevertheless, we know Jesus uses simple images for his message, but the message is never simple and straightforward.

Usually, when we plant the seeds, they are buried in the soil. They dwell in the darkness. While in the darkness, they may absorb nutrients from the fertilizers in the soil and go through transformation. How long will this transformation take place? We can guess, but do not know the exact timing. What exactly occurs in the darkness? We do not know. Will anything grow from the seed? We do not know that, either. As a matter of fact, the sower may put in the best fertilizer, water as often as he or she should, and tend to the seed passionately, but sometimes nothing grows from it. However, we have faith that something will grow from seeds and plant them anyway.

That is what our first parable in today's Gospel is about: God's grace and our faith. The parable talks about the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is not far away, or in the future, after we leave the world, but rather like growing seeds. We need to be faithful planting the seeds of love and have faith in those God-given seeds. God created the seed, God will graciously take care of it. We just keep planting, keep proclaiming the good news of God's love.

Actually, planting is a wonderful metaphor for our spiritual journey and spiritual growth.

When we first come to know God, it probably is because someone has planted the seed in us. We go to church to worship and listen to the messages, and to study the Bible and other teachings. We may join some fellowship, enjoy hospitality, hear and see the testimony of other Christians, and slowly understand the Word and the Way. After planting, the nurturing takes place. Eventually, some may be moved to accept God, whereas some may not. How long will this transformation take place? We do not know. There may be charismatic preachers or well-known theologians who inspire people and plant the seed, but most likely it is a friend's testimony that does so. The companionship of a regular parishioner can nurture us along our spiritual journey.

In our Episcopal tradition, the decision to accept our Lord Jesus leads to Holy Baptism. The transformation has begun. During Baptism, the celebrant blesses the water and says, "We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit" (*Book of Common Prayer*, p. 306). It tells the candidates to bury their past lives after baptism.

This is like the metaphor of planting. Someone plants the seeds, but if the seed is not buried and never releases its old form, it is difficult to sprout into new shoots and have new life. Therefore, following our Lord Christ, we need to die from our old lives before we can be born again.

When the seed is buried in the soil, it dwells in the darkness. While in the darkness, it absorbs the nutrients from the fertilizers in the soil and goes through transformation. Our life journey can be the same. Sometimes it is when we feel buried in dark moments, surrounded by stinky manure, that we are actually receiving God's gracious blessings in our life. However, we may become afraid and reject the presence of God. Then we get choked by the darkness and the smelly environment and no spiritual growth occurs. By accepting the grace of God, we go through transformation and have new life. Eventually, the plant inside the seed will break through the soil and sprout into a small plant, grows leaves, flowers, then fruits. Endure the dark moments; a new life will come out of it.

In our other lessons, we also read about planting. In Ezekiel, a twig is planted and bears fruits. We might have thought that a young twig would not have a chance to survive since it has no root, but because of God's grace and love, it grows into a noble cedar tree and offers shelters to God's other creations. Let us also look at the second parable in the Gospel. It talks about the smallest of all seeds growing to be the largest shrubs. These are about something small that turns out to be big and great—but this greatness is not about the product itself, but about its effect of offering protection and a resting place to others. In God's kingdom, anything is possible. The kingdom of God is not for material gain, but God's love for us, and our love for God and each other.

The Eastertide is over; the Holy Spirit has come. During the Great Fifty Days of the Eastertide, the lections have been about love and the transformation of the followers of Jesus who once were doubtful, fearful, and nearly faithless. They had gone through dark times, but finally got over their fear and became leaders of the Church. They proclaimed the love of God to the ends of the earth.

The Most Reverend Michael Curry, the Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church, likes to talk about a movement. He says he heard someone talk about a revolutionary movement begun by Jesus of Nazareth nearly two thousand years ago. This movement was based on the unconditional love of God for the world. He urges people to “go into the world, let the world know that there is a God who loves us, a God who will not let us go, and that that love can set us free.” Bishop Curry says, “This is the Jesus Movement, and we are The Episcopal Church, the Episcopal branch of Jesus’ movement in this world.”

So, do not be afraid of dark moments. Keep the faith. Do not underestimate the small or weak, for God has a plan for God’s creation. Let us keep planting and loving God, carrying on the Jesus Movement.

Keep, O Lord, your household the Church in your steadfast faith and love, that through your grace we may proclaim your truth with boldness, and minister your justice with compassion; for the sake of our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

*The Rev. Dr. Ada Wong Nagata is Priest in Charge and Director of Ah Foo Jubilee Community Center at Church of Our Savior, Manhattan, a bilingual congregation with English and Cantonese worship in Chinatown, New York. She is a board member of Li Tim-Oi Center, an Asian Ministry Center of The Episcopal Church based in the Diocese of Los Angeles, and Honorary Canon of the Cathedral Center of St. Paul, Diocese of Los Angeles. Ada earned her Doctor of Ministry from Episcopal Divinity School in 2015. She served as Convener of the Chinese Convocation of Episcopal Asiamerican Ministries (EAM) from 2009 to 2016. Ada loves biking and meditative walk.*