

## *“We Do Not Have to Do It All”*

*June 14, 2009*

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*Mark 4:26-34*

As I read this parable I wondered how we might rewrite it in our day and time. It might go something like this:

*There was once a farmer who went out to the fields and sowed seeds. The Jones was an innovative couple when it came to farming. They had worked hard for years developing a special growth formula. Every day they got up early and worked until late at night. They nurtured the crop, made sure it was free of disease, bugs, and weeds. Their hard work paid off and they had a wonderful harvest.*

*Later they were contacted about their secret formula for growth. They made a multi-million deal to produce and market their formula. They appeared on talk shows, co-authored a book, and started their own corporation. Recently the couple has retired and moved to Colorado while their successful growth formula transforms the world.*

THAT MIGHT BE HOW WE WOULD WRITE THE PARABLE.

WE VALUE EFFORT AND HARD WORK AND BELIEVE THAT HARD WORK EQUALS SUCCESS.

It is a story that we tell and retell all the time. We tell the story of the immigrant who came to this country with hardly a penny to his name. Then through hard work and sacrifice the immigrant built a business, sent his children to college, and retired in luxury. What we do not tell is the story of the other five immigrants who arrived on the same day. We don't tell the story of the immigrant who died of black lung disease after working in the coal mines or the immigrant who tried and tried and failed, or the immigrant who was robbed and killed. No, our stories are about how hard work equals success. It is all about us. And when things do not work out we find someone or something to blame or turn the blame on to ourselves.

I knew a very nice and responsible family many years ago. Jim had a gift as an auto mechanic and started his own business. His children went to college and his daughter completed her Masters in Music and was our Music Director. He was an elder at the local Christian Church and his wife taught Sunday School.

Over the years his business grew mostly because of his reputation and his honesty and his hard work. He employed several persons and together they supported their families. Then his wife got sick and then he got sick. They did not have health insurance. He said he could have afforded health insurance for he and his family but felt it was unfair to the other employees to just take care of his family. Insurance was just too expensive for a small business like his. He had to be fair to those who in effect made his business as it was---so no one had insurance.

The bills mounted up. The doctors and hospital hounded him. He finally declared bankruptcy and ended his business. He was broken by it. He blamed himself believing if he had worked harder he could have provided for his employees and his family. He had done everything right but lost.

This is the side of our story we ignore or brush aside. No we like the story of how our hard work equals success. Even in the church we have imported that story. We honor the pastors and congregations that grow the most or have the largest ministries. And when attendance falls we blame ourselves or others. We are attracted to those who say they

have a secret growth program. We believe if we do the right thing and work even harder success will come. Success, of course, is so often defined by tangible numbers and size.

THIS PARABLE IS COUNTER TO OUR CULTURAL STORY. *“God’s Kingdom,” Jesus says, “is like seed thrown on a field by a man who then goes to bed and forgets about it. The seed sprouts and grows---he has no idea how it happens. The earth does it all without his help, first the green stem of grass, then a bud, then the ripened fruit. When the grain is fully formed he reaps---harvest time!”*<sup>1</sup>

The farmer in this story does nothing but sow. He does not till the soil. In fact Jesus goes out of his way to make the point that all the farmer does is to go out and scatter some seed. Then he goes to bed. He forgets all about it.

So who gives the growth in the Kingdom of God? It is God who gives the growth. Our job is to scatter the seed. The rest is up to God.

This is the season after Pentecost. In the familiar text of the season, the second Chapter of Acts, we hear of the

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<sup>1</sup> The Message, Eugene Peterson. Mark 4, p.1816.

Holy Spirit empowering the church. Peter gets up and gives a sermon. The text said it was a “long” sermon. Three thousand were baptized that day.<sup>2</sup> Then these words, *“They (the disciples of Jesus) followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple followed by meals at home, every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as they praised God. People in general liked what they saw. EVERY DAY THEIR NUMBER GREW AS GOD ADDED THOSE WHO WERE SAVED.”*<sup>3</sup>

Strange! There is no mention that PETER added to their numbers. There is no mention that people joined because they liked the music, or liked the pastors, or liked the programs. It is GOD who added to their numbers.

Later on the Apostle Paul is writing about ministry. Apparently there was some who were saying that Paul was not very successful or doing enough. Paul countered with these words, *“Who do you think Paul is, anyway? Or Apollos, for that matter? Servants both of us---servants who waited on you as you gradually learned to entrust your lives*

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 2. “He went on for a long time, urging them over and over, ‘Get out while you can; get out of this sick and stupid culture!’” That day about three thousand took him at his word. The Message, p.1971.

<sup>3</sup> The Message. Eugene Peterson, p. 1971.

*to our mutual Master. We each carried out our servant assignment. I planted the seed, Apollos watered the plants, BUT GOD MADE YOU GROW. IT'S NOT THE ONE WHO PLANTS OR THE ONE WHO WATERS WHO IS AT THE CENTER OF THIS PROCESS BUT GOD, WHO MAKES THINGS GROW.*"<sup>4</sup>

GOD MAKES THINGS GROW. God is the source of the church's growth. In fact with our belief in free will it is really not entirely up to God. God moves but we must respond to the call and movement of God.

So the point of the parable is to affirm that our task is to SOW THE SEED. If we are doing that then we are fulfilling our mission and purpose. The rest is up to God.

When we are blessed with growth we celebrate. When not blessed with growth we pray. But never should we blame each other or blame our leaders or feel that somehow we did not work enough.

THERE IS A GREAT BREATH OF FREEDOM IN THAT THOUGHT. We do not have to lament, accuse, or push

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<sup>4</sup> The Message. Eugene Peterson. I Corinthians 3, p. 2068.

harder. What we are to do is to sow seed. We can relax. We can let go. We can trust in God.

THERE IS A BREATH OF FREEDOM IN THAT THOUGHT FOR OUR SOCIETY. The truth is that we can do everything right and still be out of work, or get sick, or lose a home, or whatever. There are no guarantees no matter what people try to believe or say.

I remember a person who I once met. He helped me pay for graduate school. He was very, very wealthy. He said his wealth was only by the grace of God. Although he received many invitations to speak, many awards, and much recognition he himself was always unassuming and humble. He told us one day that he could not claim that his wealth came from his great wisdom or insight or even from his hard work.

He was a cattle rancher in Texas. He was not doing all that well. Then one day someone came and asked if they could explore for oil on his land. He said "OK". They discovered oil and he was a millionaire. Sort of like the trailer for the series, "Beverly Hillbillies". You know, "Ol

Jeb is out hunting and misses and up from the ground comes a bumbling ooze.”

My friend said that the rancher next door asked them to look for oil on his land. They looked and looked and found none. The benefactor said he did not put the oil there nor did he even know it was there. Thus he saw his wealth as a gift and decided to use it by supporting many things including helping a student like me train for ministry.

Maybe we need to share with people that sometimes it works and sometimes it does not. We should work hard, be honest, be faithful, and be kind but there are no guarantees. Perhaps we should be less hard on those whose fortunes have turned sour and more compassionate toward all.

For the Church we need to recognize that it is God or the Holy Spirit who gives the growth. Our task is to sow the seed. Our task is to preach, to teach, to love, to live, and to serve. What happens to the seed is up to the persons receiving it and God. Who knows, a seed sown

may not sprout for years, decades, or generations. We need to sow---and then we need to relax. Amen.