

The Abundance of God's Goodness



Mark 4:26 "Jesus said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, (while) the seed would sprout and grow, (the farmer) knows not how. (For) The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once (the farmer) goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.'"

In the ancient world, a farmer would go out into his fields and literally just scatter the seed upon the ground. He didn't actually prepare the soil beforehand, or plant the seed in the ground, he would just take a handful of seed and fling it out

upon the earth --- leaving the rest to God. God is the one who provided the good soil. God provides the needed sunlight, and God provides the rain. As Jesus said, the seed would sprout and grow, the farmer not knowing how, for the farmer would just sleep and rise day and night waiting for the harvest to be ready. When the grain was ripe, then the farmer would go out with his sickle to gather the bounty of the fields. And after the harvest in ancient times, there was always a celebration; there was always a thanksgiving feast, a time of expressing gratitude to God for the good earth which God has given us, as an acknowledgement of our dependence upon God's graciousness for the food we eat and thus the very lives we live.

Sadly, nowadays this is not so. Modern mankind is perhaps too distant from the field, and less able or less willing to acknowledge our dependence upon the graciousness of God for our very lives. For when it comes time for most of us to harvest the bounty of our own labors, to enjoy the fruit of our own work, it seems to me that we do not usually give God much credit. Instead, we often portray ourselves as self-made men and women. We too often declare the money is ours; we earned it --- it is, is it not, the fruit of our own labor, our own difficult decisions made along the way, our own persistence and tenacity in our work, as if, as if the earth did not produce of itself as Jesus said, but as though we did it all ourselves.

Can we not instead acknowledge in our lives that we simply build upon the good efforts of others, that we are dependent upon those who have come before us, of those who died in wars so that we might be free to pursue our own dreams and aspirations? Those who settled the wilderness and built our cities and towns? Or do we just to pretend instead that we are lucky or hardworking, and did it all ourselves? Are we Americans as a people, generally grateful or greedy? That is the question. Are we grateful for the assistance of others for the lives that we live, including God? Or are we just greedy, just clinging to the things we have and claiming them as our own?

This, I think, is no small crisis in our world today. Greed and gratitude are miles apart as behaviors, and yet they both start at the same point, namely, they both start at the amazing prosperity of an abundant harvest. We are blessed in this country, but too often we fail to see how God provided the soil, how God provides the sun, and the rain in our lives. Too often today the rich claim only themselves as the 'job creators', and then complain about the high taxes that they must pay, taxes that built the roads that transported their manufactured goods to their markets or supported the public schools that educated their workers. In the end, we are all dependent upon one and another for the lives we have.

Yet we so often tell only the story of ourselves, of the countless hours at our solitary workstation, the struggle, the decisions we have made, the persistence we have shown, our personal cleverness, or the sleepless nights and sheer grit of our own efforts. Can we not acknowledge how fortunate we are? How fortunate, for example, that we were born at this time and in this place, not by any decision of our own, but by chance or by Providence, or by the Grace of God? We Americans are blessed. We have relative peace in our land when so many around the world are fleeing from perpetual violence and civil wars. We have prosperity at hand when so many around the world go hungry, or are homeless, or are dying from simple lack of sanitation or preventative public health care. We have roofs over our heads, schools for our children, and food on our tables, all in abundance. We have vaccinations before the rest of the world. We are blessed.

So, in the harvest of our good fortunes and lives, whom we do praise? Do we fall down upon knees and give thanks to God for his graciousness in our lives? Or do we stand up tall and proud, and claim what we have is our own, we earned it, it is ours! Are we grateful or greedy as a people?

For the grateful ones see the larger context of life, they see the helping hands who lifted us along the way, that good teacher, that kind relative, the decent neighbor, the loving

parent. We would not be who we are without them. The grateful see the showering of good luck in our lives, the grateful see the soil we didn't create and the sun and the rain that we didn't make. Yes, the grateful also see our hard work, and rightly so. But we don't presume to take ALL the credit for the success or failures of our lives. And so, the grateful gladly share the bounty of their harvest with others, and celebrate with one another our good fortune, and give thanks to God.

It is not so with the arrogant and the greedy, who cannot see any of this. They see only the harvest pouring in and want to claim full credit for it all themselves, and full delight in the spending and hoarding of it for themselves, and for their children and their children's children. If the greedy are religious, they may claim God as their patron; that they somehow deserve their good fortune, and the others, not so much. Some of our public leaders simply dismiss all others less fortunate than us as being lazy and unworthy. The arrogance of the 1% is sometimes beyond measure, as is their unwillingness to share with their workers, and with the poor, and with those in need of the fruits of our common labor. They all too often want to wall up the boundaries of our prosperity and then turn away the immigrant and refugee fleeing from barren fields! The life of the greedy is grounded in fear, fear of not having enough, and fear of losing what we already have --- and many of our

politicians have been peddling that fear and spreading it around in this country for years now.

Greed is trouncing gratitude these days in our country because fear is abroad in our land, displacing hope and trust and faith. Too many in this country worship a god of scarcity and not our biblical God of abundance. So which God do you worship? The greedy are not willing to trust God, to trust that there is enough to go around, that we are truly blessed, that God and God alone has provided the good soil, the rain, the sun to create our bountiful harvest, and that we are dependent upon one and another for the lives we have.

Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." (Mark 4.31-32)

Now most things in life start small and grow, like our faith, like our trust in a God of abundance. Seed and egg become a child, and child becomes a man or woman. A first glimmer of love becomes a lifelong partnership. A simple idea becomes an enterprise. One person standing up for freedom can become a mighty throng against injustice. A handful of believers become a

vibrant church or community. That which was small grows and matures.

But the same is true with fear. A small doubt blossoms into a constant state of dread and anxiety. The first speck of cancer can claim a life. A single mind set on injustice can spark an insurrection, and a wave of prejudice and discrimination. A single antagonist can bring down a good church or community.

It is not the smallness of the seed that matters. It is the soil, the watering, the sunlight, and the care of God that matters in the end. The kingdom of God is not a miracle of smallness, but a miracle of growing and maturing. The work we do as harvesters of God's bounty is not to celebrate smallness or ourselves, but to allow and encourage the growing of that which is good within each one of us, to acknowledge how truly blessed we are, and to trust in God's graciousness, that we need not ever be afraid.

Jesus' parable of the mustard seed is not a romantic fable about a cute little seed that becomes a glorious shrub housing birds in its branches. It is about the hard work of life, of growing up and maturing. It is about the hard work of faith and becoming disciples, true believers. It is about the boldness needed by the people of God when others are spreading fear. It is about the determination of good people, when so many in our communities are losing heart, it is about the needed conviction

of our leaders when so many are seeking comfort, or shelter, or food. It is about risk -- the risk of maturation, the risk of growing up, as citizens, as followers of Jesus, the risk of opposing evil and fear, of standing in the public square and speaking the truth to power. It is about faith --- about trusting God to be God, about trusting the intrinsic worth of goodness in each of us, trusting our own capacity to make a difference in the world, trusting that the harvest indeed is plentiful, that we all must share with one another, especially with those in need, trusting in our God of abundance, and not fearing any scarcity --- except the scarcity of faith, faith in ourselves, faith in our communities, and faith in God our Father.

In the kingdom of God, we face a choice: either to be grateful or to be greedy, either to be trusting in our heavenly Father or to be afraid; either to be selfish or to be the loving, generous people that God has called us to be, in order to transform the world. The choice is ours. I, for one, choose to live in hope and faith and love, and work to share our bounty and good fortune with those in need. I encourage you to do the same. Amen.