

A Seedy Story – Mark 4: 26-34
Sermon prepared and preached by Rev. Don Hammond
For First Central Congregational UCC Omaha, Nebraska
June 14, 2009

It was nothing more than coincidence that Nancy and I happened to be the first visitors to Yellowstone National Park on that day in May. My final exams were completed and we planned a trip across the country, and our first adventure was to be our first time visiting Yellowstone. We did not know that was the first day they would open the park to cars for the summer season. In the hours it took to drive through the park we saw beauty nearly beyond description. We had the park to ourselves, and passed only one or two cars in the 100 plus miles from the West entrance to the NE entrance.

This is what I remember:

- Crisp clear and an intense cobalt blue sky
- The smell of the pine trees and their deep green painted against the cloudless sky.
- Only the sounds of the wind could be heard when we would halt the car.
- A bald eagle soaring inches above the Yellowstone River and keeping pace with our car as it searched for its food.
- Elk and buffalo grazing near the edge of the snow line.
- Steam clouds from geysers rising through the trees.

An indelible, peaceful image was planted in my memory that spring day. Years passed, and there had been no opportunity to return to Yellowstone. Then the worst possible news about the park came in 1988: 40% of the park burned, and I knew I would never again see the park the way I saw it years before.

The very next year my 10-year-old son Neil wanted to go camping, so he and I took off for a great adventure in Glacier National Park. After a few days in Glacier, he asked if we could go to Yellowstone. “No,” I said, because it burned the year before and my soul could not take seeing the burned waste. I wanted to hold the memory of its beauty and not of the destruction. But Neil really wanted

to see Yellowstone, so I caved in with reluctance. Bracing myself for the sight of the fire-ravaged park, we entered, and there before me was the most incredible sight that I could not have anticipated. Thousands of burned evergreen tree trunks were sticking into the air like porcupine quills, below them on the ground, where direct sunlight had not reached for decades, was a blanket of the most beautiful array of flowers of every color that could ever be seen. It was unlike anything that I had experienced. It was far more beautiful than the most tended and manicured botanical gardens. “How about that,” I thought. I was mentally prepared for confronting the loss of breathtaking beauty, only to be surprised with a new, and unexpected, breathtaking beauty. It took a fire to set free a new wonder.

Don't you wonder how that can happen? Don't you wonder how in less than one year all those seeds could be sown or birthed in the barren burned ground under the lifeless trees? In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus tells us a Seedy Story. Actually, the story is about seeds and farmers. In Jesus' story, the seeds are a mystery and the farmer has no clue of how the mystery works. All the farmer knows is that if he throws enough seeds onto the ground, within a short time something will grow. When it is finished growing then it can be harvested and eaten. So tell us Jesus, what is the point of this Seedy Story? Are you telling us that we are nothing more than clueless farmers, or are you telling us that God is a mystery that we will never solve?

I was raised in a city, and one of the condescending phrases that I remember being spoken was “Oh, that dumb farmer.” In time I lived and worked in farming communities, and discovered that such a judgment was a terrible misnomer about farmers, because farming requires skills, knowledge, juggling, and risks far greater than any other profession or vocation I know of. Farming is much more than watching seeds grow into a plant.

Story: an old childhood friend who had become a minister visited a farmer. They had not seen each other in decades. As the two of them stood on high ground overlooking the ocean of golden fields of wheat, the minister said, “Isn't it

wonderful what God has done?” His farmer friend replied “You should have seen the way God had this place before I came along.”

Perhaps that is close to the meaning of the words of Jesus when he talks about the realm of God.

- There is mystery, but the mystery demands our additional hard work.
- God is at work but God needs us to be at work also.
- We can see the little things we do but cannot comprehend the big things that God needs to do.
- There is the fear that things won't grow, but one must have faith that some things will happen that are beyond our control.

It is difficult to persevere when not an awful lot seems to change. Since the living of Jesus, some things have not changed. We still have wars and violence of all kinds. We still have greed and selfishness, and there are not many stories of lions and lambs lying in pastures together. It is easier to count ourselves among the cynics than to remain a faithful seed sower. Jesus is certain to include in his Seedy Story the part that is easily missed. It is the “harvest” part. Perhaps the most trying part of being one of Jesus' own is the patience. Yes, Jesus says that the day will come when there will be a harvest. All those seeds we planted will bear food.

Some years ago I attended a seminar. The speaker was a dean of Drew Theological Seminary, Leonard Sweet. He brought with him a bag of coffee beans and passed it among those in the seminar with the instructions for each of us to take one coffee bean from the bag. He went on to tell us that he bought that bag of beans in Atlanta, Georgia at the cost of \$500 a pound. He said it was the only place in our country that those beans could be bought. Like you, I wondered why coffee beans would cost \$500 a pound? Here is why. In Indonesia, where they grow this coffee, there is an animal that prowls the plantations. That animal, the Civet cat, will sniff the beans on the ground and eat only those that have ripened to the exact taste that the Civet Cat desires. The

animal will walk by thousands of beans in search of the one particular bean that it likes.

There are also people who also prowl the plantations searching for the Civet Cat. When they locate one of the animals, they will follow far behind waiting for the animal to pass it's waste. Since the animal digests only the coffee bean pulp, the bean goes through its digestive system and is expelled. The Civet Cat followers need to be the most patient people in the world as they search for the animal and follow it to collect its waste. From that comes the most expensive, and I am told, the most delicious coffee in the world.

The realm of God will be the best there is, but it requires more than planting seeds and watching the coffee bush grow. The realm of God is not as easy as collecting fruit fresh off the tree or the wheat directly off the stalk. It isn't going to happen simply because we planted seeds and hoped for a harvest. It requires finding the best in what we think is the worst. The realm of God requires the patience and persistence of a Civet Cat follower, while believing and anticipating that the way to get to the best will happen because of something beyond our resources. As the best coffee in the world will not be had without the Civet Cat, the realm of God will not happen without God. The best we can do is plant, be patient, and somehow out of those efforts, the best will surface. The realm of God requires our trusting work and, despite what appears to be disgusting, will become the very best.

As Stephen McKinney-Whitaker of First Presbyterian Church in Delavan, Illinois wrote in one of his sermons:

"While we may be Kingdom witnesses and Kingdom watchers, we are not Kingdom bringers."

Our responsibility is to never quit planting, never quit harvesting, and never give-up because of what we disdain or find repulsive, because somewhere in the midst of that, the mystery of God will take over, and God will be the one that makes it so, and we will have done the planting.

Amen.