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Mark 4:26-34

June 16, 2024

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***26He 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. 28The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. 29But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”***

***30He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? 31It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 32yet 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.”***

***33With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; 34he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.***

Season 7 of “Tell Me More” with Kelly Corrigan is about being well in the modern world. Episode 9 is called “God, Science and Well Being.”3 One guest mentioned that there are studies that show that church attendance over time was associated with better mental health outcomes. But, those studies do not give us any information about what it is about church that relates to better mental health. For some, it might be the focus on God, the focus on the effects of prayer and God answering prayers. It’s all about God. For some, it is the focus on life larger than oneself, and the sense of ease that comes when we realize that we cannot control everything nor do we know everything, therefore all of our anxiety about being responsible for everything can be set aside. It’s all about yielding to something more than ourselves. For others, the mental health benefits come from being in a community, from feeling connected to those around us, from the feeling of belonging that comes from seeing the same friendly faces on a regular basis. It’s all about community.

So one question that was asked was, if an atheist walks into a church do they leave with the same sense of wellbeing as a devout believer? When hoping for better mental health outcomes from attending church, does belief in God matter? One guest, Dr. Alexis Abernathy, Professor of Psychology at Fuller Seminary, studies the intersection of spirituality and health. She answered the question by saying that she would want to know more about the particular story of that particular atheist. In other words, the affect the church service has on that atheist will depend on what the atheist brings in with them. What collection of life stories lives inside of that person? How has that person been shaped by the church as an institution, in the past? Why are they back now? What are their expectations?

In other words, the Church is just standing here, being a church, doing it’s thing. As an institution that is part of a certain tradition, we have some built in structures that we follow. The church is just the gardener planting the seeds. As a community we gather, we sing, we speak, we pray, we offer our worries to God and one another. As individuals though, each of us come with our own soil. Our own collection of life stories, our own history within or without of the church, our own expectations and hope.

You and I receive the seed into the soil that we’re made of, and that seed matures inside of us unbeknownst to the one who planted. The grain sprouts and grows, and the gardener does not know how. It is God who knows what each of us needs in order for that seed to become grain. God knows what type of soil we are made of. Some of us need more love, some of us need more academic nurturing, some of us require more felt responses and emotions to feed the seed, some of us need more quiet, some of us prefer words, some prefer music. Some of us have returned to the institution of the church after being pushed away. Some have come for the first time. Some of us come just out of habit, to see our friends. No matter the soil, the seed is still planted.

When the seed has sprouted, God will use whatever has grown to further the kindom. By using the branches of the wide mustard tree for the birds of the air to rest, God has made good and vast and useful, even the smallest and most unlikely of seeds. It is the same with us.

As a church we plant seeds of kindness, of God’s word, seeds of love and mercy.

Here is an example of a planted seed, growing only by God’s grace, into something no one could have predicted.

On June 19th, 1865, the news of the executive decree of the emancipation of slaves finally reached Galveston, TX, two years after President Abraham Lincoln made the decree.

June 19th, 1866 was the first Juneteenth celebration.

On June 19th, 1939, when Opal Lee was just 12 years old, a mob began to gather around the home her parents owned in Ft. Worth, TX. Her mother sent her and her siblings off to a friend’s house several blocks away as the mob grew larger. Newspaper accounts of the time said that the mob grew to over 500 people, who burned down the home and destroyed all of their belongings. The white families living in that area did not want Opal Lee’s black family as their neighbors.

Her parents left and eventually purchased another home and never talked much about the events of that night. Opal Lee is known as the “Grandmother of Juneteenth” for her decades of fight to make June 19th a national holiday. Her memories of her family’s trauma was the first cause in this fight. “She is determined that the holiday focus not merely on the struggles of the past but, more importantly, on those of the present.”2

Over the years Opal Lee had given thought to one day purchasing the lot where her parents home had been. Several years ago she learned that Trinity Habitat for Humanity had purchased the lot. She called them, and after learning of her story, they sold her the lot for $10.00. “HistoryMaker Homes built the house at no cost to Lee while Texas Capital, a financial services company, provided funding for the home’s furnishings. JCPenney donated appliances, dinnerware and linens.”1 This week, the week of June 19th, 2024, 85 years after that fateful day when a racist mob destroyed her family home, 97-year old Opal Lee was given the key to *her new home on that same lot.* Her first plans in her new home? To have a block party – to get to know her new neighbors.

Each of these descriptions of June 19th over the years, gives us a piece of what is an ongoing story and ongoing struggle. We can only hope that the seeds of repair and renewal will continue to sprout and spread. We don’t plan what will come into our lives and our world next. But we know for certain that God is at work, bringing about a more equitable and loving world. We are but a small part, like the mustard seed. God will help us grow and become what we are to become.

Amen.

1<https://apnews.com/article/opal-lee-new-house-racist-mob-texas-549697c3f027e58d68c040d3a0387510> Ms. Lee was so excited to move from her current home in Ft. Worth, TX into her new home, that she only planned to bring her toothbrush. Which explains the toothbrush in her hand in the newsclip of this story that was on Channel 7 news.

2<https://faithandleadership.com/juneteenth-both-cause-celebration-and-call-action?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=Juneteenth%20is%20both%20a%20cause%20for%20celebration%20and%20a%20call%20to%20action&utm_campaign=ni_newsletter>

3<https://www.pbs.org/video/god-science-and-well-being-vquezz/>