

**June 17, 2018**  
**Jeremiah 31:31-34**  
**Mark 4:26-30 pg 36**  
**“Cultivating the Kingdom”**  
**(Father’s Day)**  
**Michael Stanfield**

(Jesus) also said, ‘The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. 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 he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.’ He also said, ‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It 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.’

Words from God for the people of God. Let us pray. The grass withers and the flowers fade but your word, O Lord stands forever. Amen

My mother and father were born and raised on farms. Life for them and everyone they knew as children revolved around the planting, growing, harvesting and canning seasons of the year; and that is the axis on which they continued to spin well into adulthood. However, during their formative years in the nineteen-forties and fifties, this country was also soaring to its heights as the leading industrial nation on the planet; and so, as a sign of the times, both of my parents went to college where my father became a mechanical engineer and my mother an elementary school teacher.

But the call each spring to prepare the land for planting remained in their blood – especially my father’s. The fact is that had *his* father not absolutely insisted that he leave the farm, in order to get an education and better prepare his future family for the new economic reality on the horizon, I am sure he would still be back there today.

As a consolation, whether he has owned the land or not, my father has always found a way to plant a vegetable garden every spring; and when I was a boy, it seemed the bigger the garden, the better. The photo on the pedestal as you entered the sanctuary this morning is of his tomatoes this year. He does not like the shady land he has been resigned to plan on over the last several years, so, as you may have noticed, he has gone to planting in buckets on his back patio. As of Monday, when my mother sent those photos, those plants were over six feet tall.

Of course, as a child, I didn’t care much for all the hoeing and digging and tilling and planting and watering and hoeing some more. As it warmed up, all I wanted to do was play outside with my friends, whose parents seemed more reasonable, potting only a tomato plant or two just outside their back doors (as opposed to the row upon row of corn, okra, squash, beans, peppers cucumbers, cantaloupes and tomatoes that my father planted).

But looking back on it now, I see that early introduction to gardening as a great gift. I understand now what it does for the soul, not just to bear witness to the passing of the seasons of the year but, if possible to participate in their mystery and wonder.

Now, as a man, I understand the mixed emotions I experience when the weather warms; it is the Spirit – the Lord of Life’s call – a call that my father heard since he was a boy; a call that his father heard before him and *his* father before him – a call to participate in the miracle of creation.

I think Jesus must have understood all of this as well. Almost everyone in the peasant classes of Jesus’ day, if they had any land at all, were subsistence farmers. That would have included the family of Jesus. And so, I like to picture Jesus, as a boy with *his* father, Joseph, planting their little garden beside his father’s tiny carpentry shop. I see him going out each day, observing its growth and being awed by it.

It certainly would help explain why so many of the parables of Jesus are based in gardening. In fact, both of his parables this morning speak of the fantastic, mysterious, and miraculous growth that is inherent in cultivating a garden. He makes an analogy between this secret, yet awesome growth and the Kingdom of God.

It might help to remember here that the coming of the Kingdom of God, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, was a hope that had its origins back in the time when Jerusalem fell, the temple was destroyed, and the Israelites were carried off to Babylon. God’s Kingdom was therefore viewed as something literal – none other than the re-establishment of the throne of King David. Hence, the first century faithful were looking for an overthrow of the oppressive rule of Rome that seemed to just be making the poor poorer and the rich richer. So they were looking for a savior king. They were looking for a new world wide Kingship headquartered in Jerusalem. In other words, they were looking for something decisive that would settle things once and for all. They were looking for certainty amidst the injustice, pain and moral ambivalence in their world. Sound familiar?

Over and against this cry for certainty comes the teaching of Jesus – a teaching that states that the Kingdom of God is coming, but not as expected, for God’s kingdom is something else altogether – it is a reigning rule of love, making itself manifest in the secret recesses of the human heart and growing, like, well, like a mustard plant – something that is wondrous and sure, yet perhaps less certain, mysterious even, something which can happen fully in the present to transform one’s life regardless of who holds the strings of political power.

The problem is, Jesus came into a world that despises mystery. And over the last two thousand years, that hatred has finally issued in all out war. We only have to open the daily news to view the results of cries for absolute certainty: in the political realm, we have a president who has promised to take care of things once and for all, and in the religious realm, there are zealots both “Christian” and “Islamic who are so certain about God’s will for humanity that the use of violence is accepted as a justified means to that end.

Our modern mindset is of little help since the axiom of empirical reductionism is that there is no such thing as mystery; there is only a lacking in human understanding. Mysteries are meant finally to be solved by our brightest and our best.

Yet listen to what Albert Einstein, arguably the *very* brightest example of humanity, had to say on the matter. He said, “The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. Whoever does not

know it can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, with eyes all but dimmed.”  
*Albert Einstein, Ideas and Opinions (New York: Crown, 1954), 11.*

The good news for us today is that Jesus came not to bring certainties but to offer something much more valuable – a wonderful mystery – a mystery that is a relationship with a God become man... - a mystery that is living, growing – in the here and now.

And because that relationship is alive, it doesn't settle things once and for all. Since it is a living relationship, by its very nature it is impossible to pin down. It is positively mysterious... which is, at least one of the reasons why Jesus was crucified. His claims were so elusive that it was just easier to write him off as a charlatan and get back to the business of depending on things that were more certain and absolute.

Not much has changed, it seems. We, like the people of Jesus' day are so intent on demanding certitude...

Old Testament Scholar, Walter Bruggemann puts it this way, “We *all* have a *hunger* for certitude. The problem is the Gospel is not about certitude, it's about fidelity. So, what we all want to do, if we can, is immediately transpose fidelity into certitude, because fidelity is a (mysterious) relational category, and certitude (such is to be found in systematic theology) is a flat (predictable) mechanical category.” <http://onedaringjew.wordpress.com/2012/01/27/certainty-and-fidelity-in-biblical-interpretation-the-deconstruction-of-walter-brueggemann/>

He goes on, “So, we first have to acknowledge our thirst for certitude, and then to recognize that if you had all the certitudes in the world, it would not make the quality of your life any better because what we must have of a life worth living is fidelity. ...

Likewise, the great Southern writer Flannery O'Connor once wrote: “When we get our spiritual house in order, we'll be dead. But for now, *this* goes on: You arrive at enough certainty to be able to make your way, but it is making it in darkness. Don't expect faith to clear things up for you. It is trust, not certainty.” Flannery O'Connor, "Letter to Louise Abbott," in *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor* (Macmillan, 1988), 354.

And back to Bruggemann: “...fidelity,” he says, “is the key, and fidelity is like having a teenager in the house and you never get it settled for more than three minutes, and you've got to keep doing it again and again or you don't have a relationship.” <http://onedaringjew.wordpress.com/2012/01/27/certainty-and-fidelity-in-biblical-interpretation-the-deconstruction-of-walter-brueggemann/>

Fidelity: devoted faithfulness in spite of difficulties.

Perhaps it bears stating that fidelity is not the same thing as love. It is certainly a by-product, yet distinct, marking the inner integrity of the lover rather than the felt experience of the love. Love is marked by what we feel. Fidelity is marked by what we do, no matter how we are feeling. Current research on the subject indicates that love is what is most effective at *bringing* us together but it is not that great at *keeping* us together.

You may have heard the saying, “Love is easy; relationships are hard?” Well the research bears this out and the reason is that strong feelings and sensations of any kind carry with them the conviction (if not the illusion) of certainty. However, remaining faithful in a relationship requires something

else altogether. That requires a commitment to staying connected to the other even when, and perhaps especially when, the relationship appears on the verge of falling apart... Steven Stosny, "Love, Marriage, Uncertainty," *psychologytoday.com*. Retrieved March 9, 2013.

In his memoir, entitled "Father Joe, the Man Who Saved My Soul," English humorist and satirist Tony Hendra recounts just such an experience with God. He writes: "I was hurtling still farther into the depths, both down there and above, watching myself fall as one does in a nightmare, falling through myself, out of my own soul, which never existed anyway, incalculable distances below the solid rocks of faith and truth into fathomless cold dead space an infinity and eternity deep, where there was no God nor Christ nor faith, nor hope, nor certainty nor salvation and never would be ever again."

Terrified by the experience, Hendra sought out an old mentor of his, Father Joe, a Benedictine monk.

Father Joe knew just what Tony was going through. He explained the experience in this way: "You fell in love with God, you see, and now the romantic part is over. It happens to us all, I'm afraid."

"It feels like I'll never have that feeling of light and certainty again," said Tony.

"Someday you'll experience a much greater light and certainty than just feelings," answered Father Joe. "God gave you a great gift that terrible night. You have plumbed the depths of darkness and are still here to tell the tale."

Tony says Father Joe was right. He did recover his relationship with God, in time. But he had learned something important. He now knew he could not summon God whenever he felt like it. When things became most terrifying, with fidelity he simply had to wait for *God* to find *him*. Tony Hendra, *Father Joe: The Man Who Saved My Soul* (Random House, 2004), 88, 97-98.

Fidelity is hard. But in the end, it trumps our need to constantly demand certitude. Because Fidelity is an attitude of hopeful openness to mystery – an attitude that says, "I know God is present and God will be revealed presently and profoundly and mysteriously if I just wait and watch..."

Without this attitude, relationship breaks down. God becomes only some *thing* we believe *in* and not a real *other* we have a relationship *with*. And if we follow Jesus and his teachings, how we relate to God and to each other is more important than any issue. It is the fertile soil in which the kingdom grows.

Speaking of fertile soil... You know, for seeds to germinate, you just need the right temperature and moisture level. And when conditions are achieved *there*, cellular activity starts up. The seed becomes alive. Scientists can explain some aspects of this life, death, and life cycle, but they cannot fully understand the moment of animation.

But if we provide the fertile soil, warmth, sunshine and moisture, all we have left is the waiting. The real miracle of new life then comes from God.

*However*, we should not miss the fact that the determining factor for bringing about new life is as much the soil and the surrounding conditions as it is the seed... Just like in the parable. A seed's job

is simply to sprout life where there was none and hope the surrounding conditions will allow for growth. (Paul Peterson, *Tending the Seed*, BigHole.com/church/sermons).

The surrounding condition for the initial sprouting of the kingdom *may be* the felt love of God. But the kingdom is then cultivated not by any absolute certitude of that love but by fidelity to the mysterious person of the living Christ and to the humanity in which the Christ now lives.

There is a proverb about a spiritual master who spoke at a public meeting. All questions at that gathering were about the certitude of life beyond the grave. The Master only laughed and did not give a single answer. To his disciples, who demanded to know the reason for his evasiveness, he later said, "Have you observed that it is precisely those who do not know what to do with *this* life, who want another that will last forever?"

"But is there life after death or is there not?" persisted a disciple.

"Is there life *before* death? That is the question!" replied the Master. —Bryan Travis Hooper, "Mysterious inclusion," January 5, 2003, Washington Square United Methodist Church Web Site, [wsumc.org](http://wsumc.org).

*Living before death, Kingdom living, requires of us an acceptance of our neighbors.*

Living before death, kingdom living, requires of us an awareness of our mysterious links with all living things.

Kingdom Living requires of us an appreciation for each moment and for all the wonders of creation that conspired together to give this precious moment to us.

The beautiful mysterious paradox of Kingdom Living is that we are given life by embracing death – both Christ's and our own.

Death to understanding God only as some Thing to be believed in and

Death to self as the center of the universe. Only then are we able to get a glimpse of *this* glorious vision:

That we are united by the sacrificial love of God in Christ,

That we *are* freed to live fully now, with fidelity before death.

This is the good news of the gospel.

Let us pray. Gracious Lord, forgive us for insisting on certitude to the point of missing the wondrous beauty of your mysterious presence in the here and now. Open us more fully to your love and love of one another in this moment that the possibility of experiencing and living that mystery becomes a reality.

And now bless this portion of what you have given us, our tithes and offerings that they may help water the seeds of your kingdom. In the name of Christ we pray, amen.