

## **FROM THE TINIEST OF SEEDS**

Deuteronomy 6:10-12

Mark 4:26-34

A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham

First Presbyterian Church

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The arrival of the first tropical storm or hurricane each year always brings with it memories of other storms. Alberto's untimely visit a few weeks ago was no different. The rain, flooding, and mudslides across the south brought with them memories of the day I lost my car in a flood in Richmond during Tropical Storm Gaston fourteen years ago, and then of the chaotic aftermaths of hurricanes I've witnessed. People in every coastal region remember certain storms. Here in New York, of course, it is Superstorm Sandy. For others, it is Katrina, or Andrew, or Harvey. For me personally, it is still Hugo back in 1989. We were living in Charleston, South Carolina when Hugo came ashore there with its 135-mile-per-hour winds, and I still have images of that storm seared in my mind.

The big storms always leave an ugly wake. But there is another side to their aftermath. There was much good that came out of those difficult days after Hugo – a new sense of community forged by shared deprivation and shared trauma, a heartwarming sense of our connectedness to people and churches all over this land who came to our aid, and moments which could only be described as seasons of grace and gratitude – people thinking more of others than themselves, pitching in to help neighbors and strangers.

And there were moments which seemed odd at the time, but which in the long term were deeply inspirational. I learned of one such moment from my friend and colleague Jim Lowry, who was then serving another church in Charleston. Hugo didn't slow down much when it hit the South Carolina coast; the storm raged right through the state, doing considerable damage in Charlotte and other parts of North Carolina and Virginia. One of the inland South Carolina communities that bore the brunt of the storm was the small town of Great Falls, where Jim Lowry's parents lived. When dawn finally arrived after Hugo's early-morning assault, Jim's dad went out to survey the damage. Wind damage to the house and roof, lost shingles and shutters. But the hardest discovery, emotionally speaking, were the eighteen stately pecan trees lining their driveway – trees Hugo had cut down like a giant weed-eater.

In the days that followed, Jim's father, whom everyone knew as "Pappy," supervised the clearing of the debris from those trees, and the removal of the stumps. And then, as soon as that work was done, he set out to plant eighteen new pecan seedlings where the old ones had been. Pappy was in his eightieth year when he planted those trees. He was not in good health, and knew he was dying. In fact, I attended his memorial service later that fall. But that September he replanted all eighteen trees. The shade he and his family had enjoyed for all those years came from trees Pappy's grandfather planted as a young man. Pappy wanted to make sure that those who would

live there in the mid-twenty-first century would also enjoy such shade. So, he planted those trees in the last year of his life.<sup>1</sup>

We spoke here a few weeks ago of Moses, in the final year of his life, looking out upon a land he would not himself enjoy but that he treasured for those who had followed him. For years he had traveled, leading his caravan of refugees toward a land of hope and promise, and now his task was finished. But he could still speak of the fulfillment of promise, and he could still offer a reminder of the work that was done years before to lay the foundation for the promise; and so, as Reggie read a few minutes ago, Moses told the Hebrew people: “When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob to give you – a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant – and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Deut. 6:10-12). Moses might also have told the people that reflection on such grace should lead them to dig some cisterns, to plant some olive groves, to cultivate some vineyards for the sake of those who would follow them.

Some years back Maya Angelou gave the commencement address at Occidental College in California. She began her remarks with a question for the students: “How did you get here today?” Then she said, “I’ll tell you how I got here.” And she spoke of her forebears. She told of African slaves shackled in chains in slave galleys, and huddled together, who paid for her to get there. And she told about a woman in her girlhood church in Stamps, Arkansas, who was determined to teach her some culture...and of a dignified, elderly literary woman who invited a young Maya Angelou to tea and introduced her to Charles Dickens and *A Tale of Two Cities*.

All of these people paid for me to get here today, she said: the slaves, Miss Culture Lady, and the old, literary woman at tea reading Charles Dickens. Then, Maya Angelou spoke words that carried within them the essence of biblical stewardship and leadership. She said, “Now, you get on out of here. And with your very life, pay for somebody else to get here.”<sup>2</sup>

Such an awareness is not far different, I suppose, from what drove Pappy Lowry to plant those eighteen pecan seedlings... the recognition that we often sit in the shade because someone planted a tree. Today’s Scripture lessons call us to gratitude for the work of forebears who have gotten us where we are, and they invite to plant and “pay forward” what might bless those who follow us. But even more, they point to the grace that makes our efforts fruitful... to what God can do with what we plant. And that’s no small thing.

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Lowry told me this story in the post-Hugo days of 1989. He recounted it at the January 1994 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Holmes, New York.

<sup>2</sup> Maya Angelou’s words at Occidental College were recounted by Dean Thompson, pastor of the Pasadena (CA) Presbyterian Church, in a sermon preached on these parables in January, 1994.

I remember a comment the farmer poet Wendell Berry made once about the story of Jesus turning water into wine, arguing, as a farmer might, that the miraculous was something we encounter every day, if we will but notice. He said,

The miraculous is not extraordinary but the common mode of existence. It is our daily bread. Whoever really has considered the lilies of the field or the birds of the air and pondered the improbability of their existence in this warm world within the cold and empty stellar distances will hardly balk at the turning of water into wine - which was, after all, a very small miracle. We forget the greater and still continuing miracle by which water (with soil and sunlight) is turned into grapes.

The fact that such miracles take time does not make them any less miraculous. Jesus 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." He also said that 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...." (Mark 4:26-27 and 4:31-32a).

The emphasis in these parables is on encouragement, for the seed grows mysteriously – independent of human efforts beyond the planting, and dependent instead upon the remarkable fertility of the earth. As Biblical scholar Fred Craddock says, "The seed carries its own future in [itself], and efforts to coerce and force growth are futile. The kingdom of God is exactly that: the kingdom *of God*. The thought both chastens and encourages followers of Jesus."<sup>3</sup> Here then is an encouraging word about grace, a word which I offer to all of us today, but particularly to the officers of this congregation, to the teachers in our church school, to the parents of our children, to the caregivers and the ministry providers among us. Our task is to plant seeds of faith, and of hope, and of love...and then to trust in the providence of God.

More than being a call to action, more than serving as a call for more preaching, or more social action, or an urging to put the shoulder to the wheel, this little parable is an affirmation of the powerful fertility of the earth, and thus of the gospel, and in turn of the commonwealth of God. Growth cannot be coerced. The effects of all seed planting are revealed in the harvest, and they will come in due course.<sup>4</sup> Confident in that promise, we are set free in the meantime to do remarkable things. Again, I think of Wendell Berry:

Ask the questions that have no answers.  
Invest in the millenium. Plant sequoias.  
Say that your main crop is the forest  
that you did not plant,

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<sup>3</sup> Fred B. Craddock, et al., *Preaching the New Common Lectionary: Year B, After Pentecost*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1985, 51.

<sup>4</sup> Jon Walton, unpublished paper presented to the January 1997 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Chicago.

that you will not live to harvest.<sup>5</sup>

One of the realities of ministry, and it is equally true of many other vocations, is that it may take years to see the results of our labors, the fruit of our planting. We know the satisfaction of those who tell us of the difference something we did or said years ago has made to them, but such accounts are rare, and much of the time we will never know. Yet here is encouragement, that we can entrust such outcomes to God. Our task is but to be faithful and persistent planters, thinking not just in the present tense, but also in the future tense, utterly confident that the future belongs to God, and that God's future is good.

Edmond McDonald once noted the subtle, often unseen ways God works, beginning small in the way many of us often do. He said,

When God wants an important thing done in this world or a wrong righted, [God] goes about it in a very singular way. [God] doesn't release thunderbolts or stir up earthquakes. God simply has a tiny baby born, perhaps of a very humble home, perhaps of a very humble mother. And God puts the idea or purpose into the mother's [or father's] heart. And [they put] it in the baby's mind, and then – God waits. The great events of this world are not battles and elections and earthquakes and thunderbolts. The great events are babies, for each child comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged with humanity, but is still expecting goodwill to become incarnate in each human life.<sup>6</sup>

We will celebrate and bear witness to such a truth when we baptize Roland and Josie and Evelyn and Margaret in just a few moments. And perhaps in their faces we will also see other faces. In these days when our hearts are stirred by the plight of refugee children at our southern border, many of whom bear the sign of the cross from their own baptisms, we also bear witness that the God of our children is the God of those children, and that God has a heart of grace, love, and welcome, as well as a special place for the poor and those who struggle against oppression. We plant seeds for those children, too, when we make our baptismal promises.

Yesterday the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. convened its biennial meeting in St. Louis. The commissioners have many issues before them, of varying degrees of magnitude, as they gather to consider the ministries and witness of our church. Though they come from different places and with differing perspectives, those commissioners share a common purpose, and that is to provide leadership and service, not just for today, but for generations to come. My hope is that the commissioners might weigh Moses' words about produce we didn't plant and Jesus' parables about seeds and planting as they do their work. I hope for goodwill to become incarnate in the church's life. And I pray for the church leaders, who are called to plant

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<sup>5</sup> Wendell Berry, "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front," *The Country of Marriage*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973.

<sup>6</sup> Edmond McDonald, in the *Presbyterian Outlook*, as cited by Marian Wright Edelman, *Guide My Feet: Prayers and Meditations for Our Children*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1995, 7.

seeds, the yield of which they may never see, to plant their seeds with courage and confidence, trusting in the miraculous power of God to bring those seeds to flower.

Then again, such is the task of all Christian stewardship... and of all Christian leadership – to plant seeds of hope and love and justice and welcome and generosity, for the sake of those in need, not only here and now, but for generations yet to come. Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime, said Reinhold Niebuhr, and therefore we must be saved by hope.<sup>7</sup>

We press against such hope when we are young and the world stretches out before us, but when we are older, we know that it is only hope that will sustain us. Pappy Lowry was eighty years old when he planted those trees. But just imagine what must have been in his mind... and imagine what interest might accrue from even the small things we do now. Indeed, remember what God can do with even the tiniest of seeds.

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<sup>7</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952, 63.