

Proper 6 B
Mark 4:26-34
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The Do-Nothing Farmer
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[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.' With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

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I love the way that Jesus explains something as monumental, something as earth-shattering and life-altering as the kingdom of God, using the image of seeds growing in the dirt or an unruly weed that shoots up from an insignificant kernel. The kingdom of God or, as we might call it today, the realm of heaven, was a really big idea.

The very first words Jesus speaks in Mark's gospel are: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.' The kingdom of God is Jesus' very favorite topic!

There's no conceivable way that his quaint descriptions of it as seeds growing in dirt or as a weed were meant to downplay its significance.

On the contrary, Jesus spoke in metaphors like this, in parables, in teaching stories when he was trying to make a difficult concept more accessible to his audiences. Jesus' audiences, by and large, were uneducated working-class folks and his parables were meant for them: farmers, fishers, bakers, builders, shepherds, and even merchants. Like any good public speaker, Jesus told stories that would contextualize his message and bring it home to his particular audience. In the case of these stories about seeds and weeds, I can't help but wonder if the farmers in his audience took offense.

Anyone who has ever grown so much as a marigold, knows that there's more to farming than simply scattering seeds on the ground and waiting, right? You've got to prepare the soil, break up the hard clumps and mix in compost and manure. You've got to carefully plant the seeds and cover them with just the right amount of powdery topsoil. You've got to water the seeds and pull the weeds – so many weeds! You've got to protect the sprouted saplings from birds, bunnies, and bugs using fences, nets, scarecrows, or chemicals. And you've got to keep on watering, weeding, and protecting until finally the fruit is ready for harvest. There's no let's-just-scatter-seed-and-wait-till-harvest method! Jesus knew that, right? He was a carpenter, after all. Maybe he *didn't* know.

Born in 1913, Masanobu Fukuoka was a successful agricultural researcher until, in 1937, illness brought him to the brink of death and he had an epiphany. "All human knowledge is empty, all human action is meaningless, and that nothingness is the fundamental nature of reality. With this basic existential insight, he began to approach life's problems with a fundamentally different attitude . . . Rather than attempting to solve 'problems' through actions – new interventions to 'fix' things – he began to adopt a more 'subtractive' approach. Instead of action, he would

experiment with inaction . . . Rather than solve the problems of agriculture by adding work, he would attempt to *do less*.”¹

Returning to his hometown, Masanobu began to perfect his unique, natural farming method of “no cultivation, no chemical fertilizer, and no weeding,”² popularly known as “do-nothing” farming. In 1975, Fukuoka published his manifesto, “The One-Straw Revolution,” which was quickly translated into many languages, sold millions of copies, and launched him onto the international stage as one of the leading voices in the natural food movement.

Fukuoka once wrote:

I do not particularly like the word 'work.' Human beings are the only animals who have to work, and I think that is the most ridiculous thing in the world. Other animals make their livings by living, but people work like crazy, thinking that they have to in order to stay alive. The bigger the job, the greater the challenge, the more wonderful they think it is. It would be good to give up that way of thinking and live an easy, comfortable life with plenty of free time.³

Perhaps he and Jesus were cut from the same cloth. Perhaps the story Jesus tells about the scattered seed and the “do-nothing” farmer, is not so much about what the farmer *doesn't* do and more about what the soil *does*, what the earth does. The same can be said of the mustard seed which does nothing until it falls upon the ground. Only then, only in connection to the dirt, to the earth, does the seed become the greatest of all shrubs and shelter the birds in its shade.

¹ Dr. Trent Brown. “The Philosophy of Masanobu Fukuoka,” [Permaculturenews.org](https://www.permaculturenews.org), July 25, 2020: <https://www.permaculturenews.org/2020/07/25/the-philosophy-of-masanobu-fukuoka/>.

² “Masanobu Fukuoka,” [F-masanobu.jp](https://f-masanobu.jp): <https://f-masanobu.jp/en/about-masanobu-fukuoka/>.

³ Masanobu Fukuoka. *The One-Straw Revolution*, New York: New York Review Books Classics, 2009.

In the case of Fukuoka, his “do-nothing” or natural farming methods still require extensive research, preparation, and husbandry to produce good yields. The “do-nothing” farmer in Jesus’ story about the kingdom of God does nothing more than sow the seed and wait for the earth to do the rest.

As is the case with all Jesus’ parables, these two examples aren’t really about farming or mustard shrubs. They point beyond themselves to serve as illustrations for the kingdom of God, Jesus’ personal pet project. While the farmer may have a role in sowing the seeds of the kingdom, it’s the earth, the ground, the soil that really does the work of making them sprout, and grow, and bear fruit. The quality of the soil is really, really important. Maybe that’s where this all comes down to us.

We can talk about the love, justice, unconditional welcome, timeless wisdom, and perfect peace of our faith until we’re blue in the face. But these are just seeds. Are they falling in soil that will allow them to sprout, and take root, and grow big, and bear fruit? Is New England Congregational Church a plot of rich earth that can become a field of evidence for heaven’s realm in our midst? This community and ones like it are meant to be the good soil, the rich earth that the seeds are sown in so that we can bear witness to the possibility of a world that looks different, better, more loving and more welcoming, more wise and more peace-filled than the one we’re all living in.

Last Sunday, with more than 8 different congregations gathered in this room in unity, leaving this place to bear witness to a faith we actually believe is good news, walking together amidst thousands, I think we caught a glimpse of the kingdom of God. Wouldn’t it be great to see more? I think our community and our world is longing to see more.

May we be the good soil. Amen.