

TWO PARABLES OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Mark 4:26-34

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. James R. Wheeler
At St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

One of the stories I enjoyed reading to my children when they were young was *Frog and Toad Together*. This is a chapter called "*The Garden*."

Frog was in the garden. His good friend toad came walking by. "What a fine garden you have frog," he said. "Yes," said frog. "It is very nice, but it was hard work." "I wish I had a garden," said toad. "Here are some flower seeds. Plant them in the ground," said frog, "and soon you will have a garden." "How soon?" asked toad. "Quite soon," said frog.

Toad ran home. He planted the flower seeds. "Now seeds," said toad, "start growing." Toad walked up and down a few times. The seeds did not start to grow. Toad put his head close to the ground and said loudly, "now seeds, start growing!" Toad looked at the ground again. The seeds did not start to grow. Toad put his head very close to the ground and shouted, "NOW SEEDS, START GROWING!"

Frog came running up the path. "What is all that noise?" he asked. "My seeds will not grow," said toad. "You are shouting too much," said frog. "These poor seeds are afraid to grow." "My seeds are afraid to grow?" asked Toad. "Of course," said frog. "Leave them alone for a few days. Let the sun shine on them, let the rain fall on them. Soon your seeds will start to grow."

That night toad looked out of his window. "Drat!" said toad, "my seeds have not started to grow. They must be afraid of the dark." Toad went out to the garden with some candles. "I will read the seeds a story," said toad. "They will not be afraid." Toad read a long story to his seeds. All the next day toad sang songs to his seeds. And all the next day toad read poems to his seeds. All the next day toad played music for his seeds. Toad looked at the ground. The seeds still did not start to grow. "What shall I do?" cried toad. These must be the most frightened seeds in the whole world!"

Then toad felt very tired, and he fell asleep. "Toad, toad, wake up," said frog, "look at your garden!" Toad looked at his garden, little green plants were coming up out of the ground. "At last!" shouted toad, "my seeds have stopped being afraid to grow!" "And now you will have a nice garden too," said frog. "Yes," said toad, "but you were right, frog. It was very hard work."

Jesus described the Kingdom of God in much the same terms as toad and his garden. He 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.

How anxious and worried we often are about things over which we have no control. The Kingdom of God is God's creation, not ours. We might plant the seeds and water the soil, but we cannot make his Kingdom grow. That's God's work. And yet how often we look over the work of God's Kingdom and try to force it to grow. We yell at it to grow. We sing to it. We tell stories to it. We play music for it. But the growth is God's gift not our own doing. We think somehow we have to generate the faith to save ourselves. We have to believe hard enough for someone to be healed. We have to berate ourselves enough to really acknowledge our sins and be forgiven. We have to pray with a certain amount of fervent intensity to really be in God's presence. Of course it doesn't happen that way. God's gifts, God's presence, God's love, God's forgiveness, God's healing, God's grace is a completely free gift. We cannot manufacture it. We cannot make it happen of ourselves. It is God who gives the growth. The growth of God's Kingdom is as inevitable and certain as the growth of seeds sown in the soil.

I have a sign hanging on the bulletin board behind my desk, which Fr. Fred gave me some years ago. It reads, "*Do not feel totally responsible for everything; that's my job! Signed, God.*"

The truly good news is that the Kingdom of God doesn't rest upon you and me. We have plenty of responsibility towards it: to plant seeds, take care of the garden, water, fertilize, thin, weed, harvest. But there is something beyond us, something we might well call "*grace*," which is in the mix and makes it happen, makes it grow. The Kingdom of God, whether we recognize it or not is in God's hands and God's control. Our part is to learn to trust, to "*let go and let God.*"

The second parable in today's Gospel is of the mustard seed. From the smallest of seeds grows the largest of shrubs. Great things can come from even the tiniest of beginnings.

This make me think of Cooper Rieg, the little boy with San Filippo syndrome and his family for whom we've been praying and supporting since the beginning of the year. Cooper went through intensive chemo-therapy to destroy his blood and marrow cells, and then was given a *transplant* of umbilical stem cells. From a tiny thimble-full sized donation of new cells the hope is for the donor cells to thrive and grow and multiply. *Grow cells grow!* we are all praying. And they are growing. I read yesterday that the new cells comprise 98 ½% of Cooper's red blood cells.

Cooper's mom Shannon wrote a couple weeks ago:

100 days ago, Cooper received the gift of **HOPE!!!** There have been many bumps in his road, but as I sit here and look at him today, I smile. I reflect back to all the things he has persevered and how drastically our lives have been changed in 6 months. Will this transplant work? I do not know. But what I do see today (because we really do take 1 day

at a time) is a little boy full of laughter and smiles. And while there were many days I wondered if we had done the right thing as I sat there and watch my child so very sick, I believe in my heart that the process itself has not gotten the best of his spirit. On good days, I see him run and jump and play. I hear him telling 'knock-knock' jokes that leave me in belly laughs. I've heard him learn to say new words and learn new skills. I've listened to him give me directions on where to turn to get back home. Although we have 100 days down, we still have 265 days to go. I know there will still be bumps in the road, but this brave little boy will continue to persevere.

We continue to have HOPE.

HOPE that Cooper will continue to well during this post transplant phase.

HOPE that the cells will race to his brain and save it from atrophy.

HOPE that the cells will spread throughout his body and save it from physical degradation.

HOPE that the transplant will accept its host body as its own.

HOPE that our family can go home and find a new sense of normalcy.

HOPE that this will work beyond what the doctors believe. (I believe that is what you'd call a miracle!)

HOPE & PRAYERS-

Shannon

We pray and hope with her for the mustard bush results from that tiny thimble-full transplant of stem cells.

What are the seeds that God has planted in the soil of your life? What are the seeds of his presence, his love, his call to serve others? How is God's life, God's rule, God's presence alive and growing in you? You may be wrestling with new ideas, struggling to grow and change. Perhaps slowly, surely you are learning to live without someone who has died whom you love. Perhaps you are struggling to forgive and accept yourself for who you are, learning to accept yourself as someone fully forgiven and loved by God. Perhaps you have taken on some ministry or work to help others.

God's grace working in our lives is often hard to see. It is hard to see our own individual growth and change. Others can often detect it better than we can for ourselves. And yet God's grace does break forth into our lives. If we prepare the soil, if we provide the needed nutrients and water, if we pull out the weeds that threaten to crowd out that new life, and sometimes even if we don't, God's grace will grow in us. There is a tremendous gif-like quality to this grace of God. We don't create his life in us. His grace is a gift – a gift that, if we let it, will grow and flourish and ripen within us.

Tending God's garden, God's possibilities, can indeed be hard work. And yet it's not all our work. It's also God's work. The power of God's growth, of God's Kingdom, God's love, is beyond our control. We can support it, but we cannot manufacture it. It's a gift. Let us trust God's gifts and hope for the possibilities that even now are about to sprout and grow.