

The Unexpected Possibility

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Preaching on:
Mark 4:26–34

I'd like to invite you all to come by my yard sometime—take a good look—because right now everything is looking pretty good. I've been mowing it regularly (even the hard part, that steep rock-filled drainage ditch between the sidewalk and the road), I got the spring pruning and trimming all done, I cleared out the brush piles behind the garage that had been building up since last spring, I filled in all the old groundhog and chipmunk and rabbit holes, I pulled all the weeds growing out of the cracks in the driveway, we've cleaned up the garden beds, and I bagged up all the clippings. It's pretty impressive! ...If you're going to walk by though to check it out, please do it soon, because in just about a week everything's probably going to look terrible again.

It makes me anxious when the yard looks bad, especially in a neighborhood like this where most people's lawns are professionally maintained and look perfect all the time. When I get too busy to mow or weed whack or prune or whatever, I feel like I'm letting everybody down, I feel like I'm letting the "Garden State" down. If someone stops to let their dog relieve itself in my yard, I worry even that the dog is judging me for my long grass. So, I prefer for things to look neat and tidy. I prefer for things to be under control. I prefer my lawn to look like everybody else's lawn. I really do. But the yard has this mind of its own! It thwarts me! The grass and the shrubs and the weeds and the seeds, they have their

own agenda.

Being “in charge” of a couple yards these last five years has taught me that I’m not actually in charge at all. The yards are in charge. I’m just like nature’s janitor, I’m the cleanup crew. I am not the boss, I’m just here to respond. And I take my orders from a higher power. “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.” The Kingdom of God is like a lawn: you think you’re in charge of it, you think you control it, you think you own it, you think you’re responsible for it, but the fact is that your influence is very limited. You can plant and you can cut. But the real magic—the life, the growth and transformation, the flowers and the fruit—they belong to God.

This all comes down to our spiritual attitudes, which are very important. In some ways, spirituality or Christianity is just an attitude. It’s an orientation to life. I plant tomatoes in my garden in the spring. I pick tomatoes off my vines all summer. I must be the King of Tomatoes! Tomatoes are here to serve me! But to those of us willing to listen to Jesus’ spiritual wisdom, we must cultivate a different attitude. I have received a gift too wonderful for me. And in response to that gift, I will become a servant to these tomatoes.

In Genesis, God tells Adam and Eve to work and care for the earth. God calls all of us to become stewards. But stewards, over time, often forget themselves and begin to behave like entitled kings and queens. When we elevate ourselves over the magic we are supposed to serve, we lose sight of it. God’s magic is a ground-level, grassroots kind of magic, and we need to stay close to the ground to really appreciate it.

We’re also called to be stewards of the church. We work and take care of it. And it’s critically important that we maintain the attitude that if God is at the heart of the church, just like God is at the heart of nature, then one of our most important jobs is to know when to get the heck out of the way of the magic. Get out of the way of the growth and the change and the transformation that can only ever truly belong to God.

And I’ll go one step further still. How often have you heard someone say, “Take control of your life!” “Become the master of your own destiny!” “Make your own future!” I’m not saying those things don’t work. There is a reason we live in a culture of power and dominance and control—because it produces results! I can’t argue with that. It also produces a lot of problems—war and conflict and pollution and the like at a global scale, but also, at the individual level, anxiety, and depression, and disconnection, and disease. So, being in control “works,” but I’m not sure we’ve really reckoned with everything we get in that bargain.

In my life, my greatest achievements, the biggest growth, the deepest and most meaningful callings

have not been my doing. I'm only standing here with you today because God has made some magic in my life, magic that is far beyond my control. I am a steward of that magic, a responder to it. I'm along for the ride. I'm not the boss here. An instrument doesn't play itself. I cannot understate the difference it makes in our lives to plant tomatoes and pick tomatoes as if you were a child at God's magic show, as if you were instrument being played by God's hand, as if (at any moment) a new and unexpected seed might be planted in your life. Because when we take control, all the yards look the same. When we take control, we stick to the well-worn path. When we take control, we think we already know everything we have to look forward to and we miss what God is doing.

The mustard seed is the smallest seed of all. But when it hits good soil, it grows like a weed. It takes over the whole lawn. Soon it's a bush so big that the birds move in and make it their home. That's what the Kingdom of God is like, Jesus tells us. It's the seed you barely notice, that produces the weed you most want to mow down, that if you would only let it grow would transform your whole life. When you're in control all the time, it's very hard to go in an unexpected direction. It's very hard for something new to sprout up in your life.

We so desperately want to believe that the Kingdom of God is the greatest power in the universe! No other kingdom can stand up to its greatness! God is almighty! All powerful! Whatever is happening in the world must be God's plan! But Jesus' teachings on the matter couldn't be more opposite. The Kingdom of God is tiny, low to the ground, quiet, and easily overlooked. It must be searched for like a lost coin, like a lost sheep, like a perfect pearl. That means the Kingdom of God only has power when we pay attention to it in our lives. It only has power when we search for it in our lives, when we allow it to grow, when we humble ourselves to the point of placing ourselves within its power. The Kingdom of God only has power if we let it have power. It only has power if we respond to it.

When was the last time you were genuinely surprised by your relationship with God? When was the last time you let your spiritual yard get messy? When was the last time you allowed a pesky weed a little room to grow in your life? When was the last time you gave up control without giving up attention? When was the last time you got out of the way without turning your back completely on what was taking place?

Beloved, living a spiritual life requires a foundation of faith. Faith is not a series of beliefs that we assent to intellectually and then go about our business being the boss of everything. Faith is an attitude, a humbling orientation to life that enables us to believe in, and by believing respond to, God's unexpected possibility.

May there be meaning in your messiness; may there be joy in your unexpected twists; and may there be magic whenever we get close enough to the ground to touch the Kingdom of Heaven. Amen.