

Father's Day, Carrots and the Kingdom of God

The Second Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. Dr. J. Stewart Hardy

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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Ezekiel 17:22-24; Psalm 92:1-4, 12-15;
2 Corinthians 5:6-17; Mark 4:26-34

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Here, you sow the seed after I open the row,” my father said, “and I don’t want you to be like Charlie B! When the seed is up, we’ll thin the row and we’ll have great carrots!”

Charlie B. was our next door neighbor when I was a kid, and Charlie was very, very, very frugal. When he planted a row of carrots, he was on his knees, and he deliberately planted one carrot seed at a time to the appropriate distance, to the next seed to the appropriate distance, to the next seed, and there wasn’t a seed that Charlie had that was ever wasted.

Both Charlie and my father were dedicated to their gardens, and while reading the gospel this morning and thinking about Fathers Day this business of sowing carrot seeds with my father popped into my memory. For the life of me, I can’t remember if I ever gave my father a card or a gift on Fathers Day, but I do remember planting carrots and marveling at the time how from such a tiny, tiny seed such large carrots grew.

In the gospel as we heard it read this morning, Jesus draws the attention of the people and the disciples who were listening to Him to the act of sowing seed. They are to understand that His word, the word of God spoken through Him in a new and reforming and changing way, His instruction, is to be just like the sowing of seed. For His word, His instruction, sown in receptive hearts, plants the seeds of the kingdom of God here in the world.

The kingdom of God, mark you, not the kingdom of men!

Jesus and the people to whom He spoke were very familiar with planting seeds and raising crops, so Jesus used their familiarity with agriculture to help them understand what this kingdom of heaven was like. He wanted them to understand that even though the kingdom had very small beginnings among them, it would flourish of its own accord. After all, who in Jesus’ time could possibly have imagined that thousands of miles away in another nation you and I would be listening to the self-same story almost two thousand years later?

And what Jesus wanted them to understand was the role that they would play in sharing the planting. While carrot seed might produce rather splendid, fat orange flavorful carrots, the much, much smaller seed, the mustard seed, the smallest seed in the world, produces something far greater, a huge shrub 10 to 12 feet high, thick in foliage, heavy in branch, and filled with birds nesting and roosting.

It was a parable designed to encourage those who heard Jesus realize that they were part of a magnificent process of nurture and growth and fruition set in motion by His loving Father – the self same Father who, believe it or not, has adopted us. In and through our baptism we have become His adopted and beloved children, not just passive recipients of His grace, forgiveness and His compassion and His love, but active participants in the growth of the kingdom, sowers of the seed, tellers of good news, bearers of glad tidings.

According to Mark when you read his gospel, the first proclamation of this good news came in Jesus Himself. It's the shortest sermon in the world and it's the envy of every preacher, "The time is fulfilled," Jesus said, "and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." The good news was that God loved His people, that He was their heavenly Father; that He was dedicated to forgiving the wrongs they did to Him, to one another, and to themselves; that as a loving Father he wished to bring them back into a living and vital relationship with Himself; and that He would overcome in the end, their death in and through His only and beloved Son so that they might know they would have everlasting life.

It's to honor and glory of our heavenly Father that we gather on the Sabbath and one could almost say, if you will, that we're gathering on our Father's day.

Now, the secular Fathers Day we celebrate began here in the United States. Mrs. John B. Dodd first proposed the idea in 1909 to honor her own father, William, who was a civil war veteran. When Mrs. Dodd's mother was bearing her sixth child, in the birth process she lost her life. Mrs. Dodd's father was left to raise Mrs. Dodd and her five brothers and sisters on his own.

As an adult, and a parent herself, Mrs. Dodd was able to look back on what her father had done, on his strength, dedication and his selflessness, and so she wanted to honor him and all fathers with a special day. Mrs. Dodd then set out to do so and the first Father's Day was observed on June 19, 1910, in Spokane, Washington. And from that tiny seed, the observation of Father's Day gradually began to spread. Of course things aren't fast in the United States (we often think the church is slow), but it took until 1966 for President Lyndon Johnson to sign a presidential proclamation that the whole nation would celebrate Father's Day on the third Sunday in June, and here we are celebrating it with gusto.

But (and there's always a "but") but there is a problem. Not all fathers are caring and dedicated and selfless when it comes to their children. To their everlasting shame we now have a growing echelon of what are called deadbeat dads; there are those dads who neglect their children, and there are those dads, perish the thought, who actually abuse their children, so there are some (hopefully not many, but some) who would rather not celebrate this day at all.

And yet, the truth of the matter is every single one of us has a divine Father in God, Himself, a loving Father who, no matter how bad or how good our earthly fathers have been, or substitute fathers have been, He remains our Father. This surely is great and good news and those of us who have experienced the love of that father, those of us who know

what it is to receive the forgiveness of that father, those of us who understand our baptism and that we are adopted as God's children, then there comes with it an obligation – a requirement that we share our experience with others as and when sharing our experience is appropriate.

To put it in everyday terms, part of being thankful to God for all that God has done for us, is to share our story, to sow, if you will, our tiny seeds of good news in the hearts and in the minds of the people we encounter in our day-to-day lives. To that end, in our parish, we've begun the Christ Renews His Parish retreats, not to change anyone, not to develop an "in group" of special people, but to provide an opportunity for people to share their faith stories and in sharing our faith stories, that those who hear them might find themselves encouraged and spiritually renewed, and that then they might have the opportunity to share their story.

To that end all faith stories are appropriate. Some stories are very dramatic to tell. Like Rudy and Carolyn Schubert's story. When their infant son Eric lay critically ill in a hospital and the doctors finally came and said there was nothing more they could do for their son, all that was left for them was to pray. They were joined by Pastor Lohse who ministered to them and to Eric and who prayed with them at Eric's bedside. And much to the surprise of the doctors and the family, Eric's condition improved dramatically, and they were all moved by the experience, and Eric recovered. Even the doctors were moved by the experience. That changed faith for Rudy and Carolyn, for their family and, after he heard the story, for Eric himself. We recalled this event at Rudy's memorial service on Friday and, wouldn't you know it in attendance was Pastor Lohse's daughter, who is herself now a Lutheran pastor serving a Lutheran congregation here in Harrisburg. A dramatic account indeed!

But there are many, many stories of faith, just as there are many, many people who belong to this congregation. Of equal importance are those stories where faith quietly grew in people's lives, whose faith sort of seems to pale in face of the dramatic, but stories nonetheless that are valid and need to be heard.

It is my prayer that many of you will eventually have the opportunity to attend a Christ Renews His Parish weekend, to hear people talking of their faith, and perhaps for you, too, to take the opportunity to share your stories with others as a result. For it's in that learning experience, that we find out how to sow the seed. Not as spectacular, rowdy, street corner, Bible waving witnesses, but as conscientious, responsible Christians who, when the time is right, share their story with another and sow the seed without fanfare or fuss, but quietly and caringly with another person in need.

My father and Charlie B., bless their hearts!, never quite got it right. Each of them was determined that their's was the right way. They were unable to see that it didn't matter how they planted the seeds, the carrots grew and they were wonderful to eat! Their whole difference revolved around how the seed was to be planted. Charlie took the risk of having a row of carrot seeds that looked as if had been struck in various spaces where the seeds had failed to produce, while father's rows were always thick and bushy and overgrown and had

to be thinned. Charlie never labored to thin out his carrots, and he didn't care that some of his seed produced only gaps in the row.

But, not with my dad. He didn't thin out the bushy rows of carrots – I did. And let me tell you, thinning rows of carrots is not fun. It's back breaking work. Except when the results got into my mother's hands, and then she would work her magic in the kitchen and serve up butter dripping, tiny, succulent, scrumptious morsels.

But in the end, both Charlie B's seed and the seed my father planted bore spectacular results by the time the carrots were mature. The remarkable thing was that no matter how they were planted, the seed grew of its own accord. And therein lies the truth of the remarkable grace of God: It's not how we tell the story, it's the fact that we dare to tell our story. And then God can take that story, plant it in the hearts of those who are receptive to it, and make it grow into a wonderful kingdom.

We are not called upon to be frugal seed-sowers like Charlie B, and we're not called to suffocate everybody with the seed the way my father planted his. We are simply asked to sow the seed when and where the opportunity presents itself, as and when we believe would be an appropriate time to talk of faith.

And the rest of it? Well the rest of it's up to the receptivity of those who hear our stories and to the grace of God who will grow the seed, and that will set the background for the wonderful harvest God will secure in His own miraculous and mysterious way. And what a harvest that will be!

Amen.