

**Just Keep Sowing**  
**The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC**  
**Rev. Jennifer Gingras**  
**January 19, 2020**

*Mark 4:1-34*

Right before today's reading, Jesus brought his rag-tag band up to the mountain and commissioned them to begin the work of changing the world. Naturally, once they came down from their mountaintop experience, they asked their wise teacher "*OK boss... just how do we do this?*"

To the great surprise of the revolutionaries among them, like Judas the Zealot, Jesus does not use the model of a military overthrow. To the great surprise of the financially minded among them, like Levi the tax collector or Martha the frugal homemaker, Jesus does not present a business plan. Instead, he holds up seeds, and points to plants and soil and gardens.

In doing so, Jesus lets them know that the pace and pathway to change can be frustratingly slow. The change he brings is not like a sudden rapture in the sky or a sudden sword from heaven, smiting those who do wrong. Instead, it is like a seed planted in the ground. Like a garden growing. It will take time. It will take patience. It will take nurturing.

A few years ago, Susie Cuseo gave us prayer partners cuttings from a spider plant as an end of year thank-you gift. It was such a sweet gesture, and I cherished mine. Now the truth is, I wish that I could say I had a green thumb, but I really don't – so every time I get a green little plant to take care of, I worry that I won't be able to keep it for very long. I'll either over or underwater it, or I'll move it too far from the sun.

Of course, my hope is always that I'll do better. My hope is it will grow and get big enough and, eventually, become a big, gorgeous plant. So, I took this little baby spider plant and set it in my office. (remove plant from pulpit, set on a stand).

Every time I go into my office I look at it - how much has it grown since the last time? Obviously, it's not something I can measure day to day. I could never see the change right at once. All I know is that years later, it has become this big, gorgeous, air-filtering miracle, despite the times when I was away or forgot to care for it.

So it is with Jesus' work of changing the world. It takes time. It takes patience and persistence. The irony is, that if we try and force it, it might actually choke the life out of some growth that is slowly going on that we

cannot yet see. This is why, in the previous chapter of Mark, Jesus suggests the disciples go out two by two, changing one person at a time, one mind at a time, one heart at a time. The work of love is gradual and cannot be forced. To force it might stop it in its tracks or derail it.

The starting place is always when we seek to change ourselves. Jesus says he speaks in parables because only those who take the time to really pay attention, to really try and walk as he walks, will get it.

On Monday, as a nation we will once again celebrate the life of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In the final speech of his life, given before he was assassinated while organizing a protest for worker's rights, Rev. King recalled a previous attempt on his life, when a "demented woman" stabbed him.

The attack had been a close call, Rev. King nearly died. If he had sneezed, he said, the knife that was in his chest would have killed him. He declared he was grateful to God he did not sneeze, since his survival following the attack meant he witnessed the desegregation of so many communities, the passing of Civil Rights legislation including the Voting Rights bill, and a sea change in the attitudes of many about race relationships.

Reflecting almost prophetically on the fact an assassination attempt might finally succeed, Rev. King said in a sermon,

*"What would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers? Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop". Sermon delivered April 3, 1968, at the Mason Temple (Church of God in Christ Headquarters), Memphis, Tennessee.

Of course, we have yet to fully arrive at the promised land Rev. King envisioned. We know that his dream is not fully fulfilled yet. But in this, his final speech, King could see the promised land, for he could see our country moving further toward its fulfillment than ever before.

This tension between what of King's dream has been fulfilled, and what is yet to be accomplished, connects well with our scripture reading today. The fourth chapter of Mark comes on the heels of Jesus announcing to his disciples a whole new way of being humanity, the Kin-dom of God drawing near – the same one that was promised by the prophets of Hebrew Scripture.

It is the dream of seeing warring tribes of humanity, divided by a history of animosity, one day lay down their weapons and beat their swords into plowshares (or in modern terms, guns into garden tools). A dream of not only finding peace, but never studying war or violence anymore, and building a society where there will be no more have's or have not's.

Jesus told all who would listen not to wait for some idyllic future to bring this to pass, but to repent and believe - here and now! To tear down any barriers to peace and reconciliation, to focus on the dream of none going without, or being excluded. In a way, many of the things Jesus says in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount and Luke's Sermon on the Plain – *things like turn the other cheek, love your enemy, give without expecting repayment* – are Jesus practically describing what living in this new world will look like.

Jesus called a rag tag band of people to follow him, including many who never could have made it through a standard job interview – people like rough foul-mouthed fishermen, former con men and tax collectors, and even women of poor reputation who were unwilling to “know their place” and be only seen and not heard. Jesus invited this band to become his fishers of people. Scandalous!

This phrase, fishers of people, was borrowed from the Hebrew prophets<sup>2</sup>, who spoke about guiding both the oppressed **and** the oppressors out of their systems of injustice in which they had been caught up, the nets in which they were so entangled they could not imagine a way out, so that – freed from how things have always been done – **both** groups could work together to build ways of life in which violence and animosity, oppression and poverty are **not** the only options. They were called to become God's instruments in changing the world through changing people's hearts, minds, and ways of

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 19:4; Ezekiel 29:4; and Amos 4:2

relating. And you and I, through our baptisms, are **still** called to be a part of that band today.

One of my favorite theologians, Father Richard Rohr, writes of the Christian life: "*You do not think yourself into a new way of living, you live yourself into a new way of thinking.*" I think what he means by this is precisely what Jesus is saying: in order to fully understand Jesus' message, to understand his method to change the world, you must first allow yourself to change.

And we do it by living differently. So in order to understand racism and let go of it, we may need to spend time getting to know people of different races, listening to their stories first hand. As we do, we find ourselves losing our stereotypes. And in order to learn peacemaking, we might need to find inner peace within and not respond reactively to conflict, to slow down and pay attention instead of lashing out.

Each day I go in my office and see this spider plant, looking small and helpless, and honestly no larger than the day before. Ultimately, the plant doesn't grow on my power: God has planted in it the seed of life that makes it grow. One day, I'm going to have to move it into a larger pot. Because for all my fits and starts, my neglect and forgetting to care for it, it did grow into one pretty hanging plant. Just you wait.

Similarly, though we must each do our tiny part, our work does not depend on us alone. God has planted within us and others seeds that, if we just cultivate them patiently, will grow. Because of that Spirit, we can trust that, as Dr. Martin Luther King once wrote, "*We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.*"<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, we need to not give up, and learn to trust.

Though the change we seek may seem only as tiny as a cutting, (or worse yet, a mustard seed!), if we do our part, working to live more justly and compassionately, working to call others around us out of patterns that exclude, mistreat, and marginalize others (and working to change those patterns in ourselves), it will bring a flowering bush of justice. Christ the patient gardener will finish the work, bringing a harvest of change. Let us trust Christ and keep sowing the seeds of love, compassion and justice. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution." Speech given at the National Cathedral, March 31, 1968.