

“Faith in a Seed”
July 19, 2026

Ezekiel 17:22-24
Mark 4:26-34

A week ago, I started this short series of sermons on growth, reflecting on seeds and soil.

After worship, Chuck Connerly was talking with me about the opening hymn, Samuel Longfellow’s “The Summer Days Have Come Again.” He said that it made him think of summer in New England, which is probably what Longfellow had in mind. Then, speaking of New England and nature, Chuck mentioned that last Sunday was Thoreau’s birthday.

Later in the day, with seeds still on my mind from the parable of the sower that we heard in worship, I remembered Thoreau’s words: “Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders.”

There was an old member of the old church I served in an old Connecticut town who lived on what used to be a farm in the middle of that town. The public library and a grade school now occupy some of that farmland, but he still had a good amount of land around his house. All summer long he sold plants out of a barn that, surprisingly, didn’t collapse when the wind blew on it. One year in the early spring I was visiting him and he said, “Let me show you something in the basement.”

As I say that, I realize those words sound more like they might be the beginning of a Stephen King story than something you’d say to your minister. But this man and his wife dealt in antique glass and rare books, so I began to imagine the wonder that he might show me—a beautiful vase, some ancient tome.

We went down this rickety staircase into one of those New England basements that had only a dirt floor. In several musty rooms there were lights glowing above tables that were filled with various sized flats filled with potting soil. A few already showed signs of life pushing upward from the countless seeds he had planted. Both of us were delighted at these harbingers of new life.

Wonders!

He had “faith in a seed,” as Thoreau put it. He looked at seeds and was “prepared to expect wonders.”

All of this leads me to ask:

What seeds are we planting in these days?

What wonders do we expect?

Jesus looked at seeds and from what he said, I think it’s fair to say that in seeds he saw the wonders of the coming realm of God.

I've said this before, although it probably can't be said often enough: when Jesus speaks of the realm of God or the realm of heaven, he is not primarily talking about someplace where we go when we die—although I do affirm that in life and in death, we belong to God. Jesus, however, is much more concerned with where we are now, with what we are doing while we are here, and with what is happening to us while we are living.

Jesus tells us that God is at work redeeming the creation that God loves. That is to say, the realm of God is coming *here*, into our midst, if we will just open our eyes and our hearts and *look*. And Jesus gives us parables such as the ones we heard this morning to improve our sight.

Of course, these are times when we question what God is doing, when we puzzle over what *we* might do. All times are like this, actually. Discerning what God is doing in the world and in our lives and our congregation is difficult work. We have to be content with seeing only a short distance ahead, like traveling in a car down a winding road at night.

To help illuminate those shadowed places, Jesus points to those things that were known, those things that were seen, those things that were common to everyone's experience. More often than not, this meant that Jesus speaks about things in nature.

The first step in our search for God is not to remove ourselves from the world, but to immerse ourselves in the life that is all around us: in plants, in animals, in children playing, in men and women working and loving.

Instead of speaking directly about God, Jesus tells of a sower spreading seed on the ground, something many of us have either done or watched. We hear of the earth, how, with the blessing of the rain and the sun, it produces "of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear."

There's nothing unusual here, nothing unknown. We are simply asked to watch.

Growth occurs slowly.

Growth occurs surely.

Just as slowly and surely the tiny mustard seed grows to become the greatest of all shrubs, providing shade and shelter for even the large birds.

Common, ordinary events. Yet events such as these are wonders pointing us toward something of the ways of God in the world and in our lives. It is from watching these events that we can begin to see the slow but certain work of God in the world. What God is developing in us and in this congregation and in the world does not appear overnight. It is more like a plant or a tree growing—constantly, usually imperceptibly.

Jesus, then, invites us into the wonder of seeds.

In this way, through these parables, Jesus calls us to a faith that lets us act in the face of all that threatens. And there is much that does threaten.

The theologian, Wolfhart Pannenberg, says that "often enough, the actual direction of the world and its history offer little evidence that a God of love and mercy, or even justice, controls it. The extent

and absurdity of what seems to be meaningless suffering, the triumph and good fortune of the unjust, and the presence of sheer evil gnaw at the souls of those who believe in God's good care."¹ A quick glance at the news confirms all of this.

And yet, the Christian affirmation of the slow, certain growth of the realm of God stands face to face with the obvious reign of death in the world. We look not only at what can be seen but also at what is unseen.

Such an affirmation does not mean things will go our way. They will, in some sense, however, go God's way. Bad things happen. Evil is present. Still, with good reason we speak of God's merciful presence in the world and in our lives.

The screenwriter, Dorothy Fortenberry, goes to church every Sunday along with the rest of her family. Trying to explain why she does this, she says: "My family and I don't go to church to deny the existence of the darkness. We go to look so hard at the light that our eyes water."

In faith, then, we trust in the slow growth of the seeds of God's realm with eyes wide open to all the signs against it. In this way we avoid both the aggressive assertion that God is with us and the passive acceptance of all that is wrong in the world. We discover instead the gospel challenge to see opportunities for increasing life and joy in each situation. We find the courage to choose what is right in difficult situations and the faith to continue with our choices in the face of opposition.

The certain growth of seeds invites us to live with confidence in God's grace and merciful goodness. And so, we are those who cherish this life that we have been given; we are those who cherish the life that others have been given.

When we realize this—and that's not always easy to do—we are able to move forward. It's not that there is any less fear or uncertainty. But we recognize that there is something—Someone—greater than our fear; Someone who calls us out of uncertainty into loving engagement with other people and with this hurting world.

And every time we act in ways such as these, our lives, our congregation becomes seeds, signs to the rest of the world that God's realm is indeed drawing near.

So, again, the questions come to each of us as individuals and all of us as a congregation:

What seeds are we planting and tending in these days?

What kind of future are we moving toward in these days?

What action can we take—even now—to make real the great hope within us?

In all the chaos and upheaval and turmoil in our individual lives, in our national life, and in the lives of the nations, we are invited to live in the confidence that seeds will grow.

When looking for a way through these very difficult days, I invite you to start with what you have, with your opportunities, with the seeds in your care. In difficult times, these are the things you most need to know: what you have, your opportunities, your seeds. With them in mind you can ask: "What might I plant, even now? What might grow, even here?"

Even now, especially now, we can choose to be people of hope and plant seeds for the future that we want. We can gather up our strengths, our resources, and our opportunities and move toward the future God desires for us. The seeds that we are planning now will grow toward a harvest.

Somehow, we as a congregation know this.

From time to time I go back to the conclusion of the history of this congregation that was written several years ago. In it we say: “Our legacy is not about rigid traditions, dogma or rituals. Our legacy...is organic, a living entity, a tool for the future.”

Organic. Living. Looking toward the future.

Seeds

For most of my time in ministry, I have kept a small jar of mustard seeds in my desk drawer. As a minister I regard mustard seeds as part of the “tools of the trade.” You never know when you’re going to need them for a children’s sermon.

I never know when I’m going to need them for an adult sermon as well.

I *do know* that I need them often as a reminder.

They are small, insignificant. Because of that, they remind me—and I hope they will remind you—that it is from just such things—the small, the unnoticed, the insignificant—that the realm of God grows and provides shelter for all.

Have faith in the seeds that are yours.

Expect wonders.

¹ Pannenberg, vol. 2 pg. 54.