

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Mark 4:26-34

Ezekiel 17:22-24

Psalms 92:1-4, 12-15

2 Corinthians 5:6-17

June 17, 2018

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

One of the best things about this time of year is the anticipation of fresh, just picked, vine-ripened tomatoes. The kind of tomatoes that are juicy and warm from the sun. The kind that you can't find in any grocery store. Because this kind of tomato plant was the one you picked up at Southern States. That plant that you chose above all of the others because it looked like it was just a bit larger than the rest, a bit stronger, already with a few yellow blooms emerging from its stem. And so you decided...that was the plant for you!

You took it home, chose the perfect sunny spot in your garden, dug a hole, gently took the plant out of its container trying to keep the soil intact. And, then you carefully put it in the ground and filled the dirt in around it. You placed a tomato cage on top to ensure that the branches wouldn't collapse under their own weight as it grew. You watered it, you weeded around it and then you waited.

It's funny how you put all of this effort into helping this plant have the best possible conditions to grow – thinking you've got it under control. You have the elusive green thumb after all. And, you're pretty proud of the work you have accomplished.

And then one day you walk into your garden only to notice that your well-maintained and cultivated tomato plant was eaten by some little critter who got into your garden overnight. And, then in your frustration, you look over to the far corner of the garden and notice that a sprout has emerged from the soil... another tomato plant that just happened to volunteer from a rotten tomato that had fallen to the ground last summer. Right there. No effort needed. It was simply growing.

There is always an element of surprise to gardening. An element of letting things be – turning it over to something greater and wiser than yourself. Because any good gardener knows – you can only do so much. Nature has a way of creating with or without our help.

There is an important lesson I have learned from my tomato plants. It is that I can help those plants along only so far. Because there is something else at work that brings them to abundant life. Something I have to put my trust in. Something I have to rely on.

Our parable in Mark, has a lot to say about this kind of growth and I think it points at something that our world today is deeply hungry for. Mark teaches us that the Kingdom of God is there whether we realize it or not. Whether we tend to it or not. God's presence isn't dependent on our awareness. It just is. Look at the words – the gardener finally goes to sleep after scattering the seeds and curiously finds them growing the next day and he says he doesn't know how it happened but that the seeds grew nonetheless. The gardener learned that the power to grow

was there even when he wasn't doing a thing. I get the impression that he throws up his hands at one point, not to taking any credit for the growth.

Yet, how many times do we want to take credit for it all?

We have become so focused on our own self-sufficiency, or own ability to make it on our own that to rely on anything outside of our selves is seen as weak. It doesn't surprise me that we have seen church attendance drop. It doesn't surprise me that we have seen a rise in people's overall dissatisfaction over how their lives have turned out. We are a culture that wants more and more stuff, more and more achievements and accolades, more and more success and we want to do it all on our own. We try to take all of the credit.

The self-help section at Barnes and Noble seems to get bigger every day. But there is a dark side to all of this self-credit.

And, I have to tell you, I have heard it said more times than I can count...if I just got this, or if I just achieved that...then I would be good enough. But yet, my life isn't what I thought it would be. I don't like my job...it isn't making a difference in the world. Shouldn't it have more meaning? I work 50 hours a week – when do I ever get some time to myself? I deserve more. I should have more because I am self-made, self-aware, self-sufficient and proud of it.

And then comes the punch line...I am just not fulfilled.

Mark might respond...really? And why is it that you aren't fulfilled? Is all of that self-help working for you? Because (and I think we all know this) all of that self-help can quickly turn to self-rejection.

Fulfillment is a funny word and one that has gotten so skewed that I am not sure any of us knows what would actually bring us fulfillment. Craig Barnes, President of Princeton Theological Seminary, commented that he was dismayed to hear the commencement speaker at his daughter's college graduation tell the 5,000 graduates that they were the best and brightest he had ever seen. So they should set their goals high, dream their dreams and be whatever they want to be. ¹Barnes reflected how damaging this can be because no class is the absolute best and brightest. We don't always get to be what we want. We won't always succeed. Life isn't always fulfilling.

But you can be whatever you want to be...or so the narrative goes. But failure is sure to come. Hardship raises its head. Illness hits. You lose a job. Your marriage fails. But you can be whatever you want to be – you were promised that, right?

Barnes goes on to tell a story about visiting his grandmother and he asked her – was granddaddy fulfilled as a tobacco farmer? She looked at him, as not understanding the

¹ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/faith-matters/you-can-be-whatever-you-wish-and-other-myths>

question. So he explained the idea of fulfillment to her. After which, she just shrugged and said, "I don't know honey. He was a farmer." It was a life his grandfather had inherited from 5 prior generations.

And here in lies the problem...Barnes commented that we no longer think of our identity as an inheritance but as an achievement we self-construct. Because we have bought into the myth of self-reliance. To be clear – I am not saying that self-reliance isn't important and isn't an essential trait to living responsibly. Of course it is. What I am saying is that we have bought hook, line, and sinker, the myth of self-reliance at the expense of reliance on God. We have created a life where when we fall, we have nothing to fall back on.

I have to say, it is so deeply sad for me when I see folks who aren't grounded in faith, in a deeper calling in their lives. When their independence has overcome their dependence on God. Our souls yearn for more. Henri Nouwen states that in these moments, at these kinds of cross-roads we can either become grateful or we can become bitter.

And so, when we start to recognize that nagging sense of not being fulfilled, maybe it's time to get back to God, to our inheritance of faith, to our calling to be something other than simply self-made. Because when you recognize that God is working within your life, that you have a calling, a greater purpose, everything begins to change. It is no longer a question of fulfillment but of blessedness.

Remember those beautiful words from 2 Corinthians..."If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away. Everything has become new." That new creation isn't a construct of your effort alone. It is an incredible gift of grace that has been poured out to you by God's unfaltering love for you. Because we belong to a loving God and God will never leave us or forsake us. When we fail, God will pick us up. When we sinned, God will forgive us. When we doubt, God gives us space to grow. When we feel defeated, God will empower and strengthen us.

These are God's blessings for you. Be present to them and receive them. Folks, you don't have to do it on your own. Thanks be to God. Amen.