

Proper 6, Year B

June 17, 2021

Mark 4:26-34 Jesus also said, “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.” He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.” With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

My parents were both primary care physicians; but their approach to medical care was as different as night and day. My dad took the aggressive approach. At the first hint of an infection, he prescribed an antibiotic. When he himself started having back problems, he opted for surgery as soon as possible. If there was something that could be done, he wanted to do it. He would say, “I may not be great at diagnosis, but I’m hell on treatment!”

My mother, on the other hand, was just the opposite. If I heard it once, I heard it a thousand times while growing up: “Let nature take its course,” she would say. Let nature take its course. She trusted in the innate power of healing in nature itself – God’s generative and re-generative Creation.

Now, as a whole, I think we 21st-Century Americans tend to be more like my dad. We don’t like waiting; and, for the most part, we don’t have to. Want a cup of coffee? Put a pod into your Keurig, and you’ll have it in a minute. Hungry? Pop a frozen dinner into the microwave, or go to the Drive-up window at your favorite fast-food restaurant (and you have dozens to choose from, since, who doesn’t want their food fast?). Tired of waiting for someone to return your phone call? Send them a text! Research shows that the average response time for a text is just 90 seconds. For the most part, we are not very patient people.

In our Gospel this morning, Jesus tells a short parable. “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 farmer in the parable is patient. He doesn't go out into his field and pull on the young plants to try to make them grow faster. He lets nature take its course, slow as it is. He sleeps and wakes, day in, day out, and the plants grow, he knows not how. He simply trusts the mysterious power of Life hidden within the seed.

Oh, if only **I** were that patient and trusting!

Priest and author Henri Nouwen noted at least two reasons that we human beings tend to be impatient. The first reason is that we are fearful. "Fearful people have a hard time waiting," Fr. Nouwen writes, "because when we are afraid, we want to get away from where we are..."¹ If we are in any kind of uncomfortable situation, we want to get away from that situation as soon as possible. If we are in emotional or psychological distress, for instance, we might reach for alcohol or drugs to numb our pain, take us out of that place of discomfort. Or, some of us might reach for the cookie jar, or go shopping, or distract ourselves with entertainment – do *anything* to take us away from that place of discomfort, sadness, loneliness, hurt, dissatisfaction with – or anger at – whatever uncomfortable situation we find ourselves in.

At least, I know this is true of me. When I am feeling overwhelmed, or stressed, or frustrated, or inadequate, I am **afraid** of *remaining* in those feelings. I become impatient to get away from them as soon as possible, by whatever means possible. I'm like my dad: I don't wait to diagnose the *cause* of my discomfort; instead, I reach for whatever treatment is available.

But what if I were to approach my situation, instead, like my mother, and let nature take its course? Rather than being so fearful of – and impatient with – whatever uncomfortable, distressing, irritating, or upsetting situation I find myself in, and rushing to get *away* from that place as soon as possible, by whatever *means* possible, what if I were, instead, to **face** my fear, *stay* with the discomfort or distress for a while, allow it; diagnose it, if possible, and let it teach me its lessons? Bring God *into* that place of discomfort or distress, and **allow** God's Spirit, the Holy Comforter, to work her divine, regenerative healing?

Is this not what the author of the 23rd Psalm does? He does not say, "O God, when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, take me out of there!" Rather, he says, with abiding faith, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." The psalmist finds his salvation **not** in being *removed* from the valley of the shadow of death, but by knowing that God, his shepherd, is *with him in that valley*.

And the psalmist goes *on* to say, "Thou preparest a table before me *in the presence of* mine enemies... thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over." While he *remains* in the valley of the shadow of death, in the presence of his enemies (and those enemies might be discouragement, or stress, or some other

kind of suffering), the psalmist finds his salvation in God's presence and overflowing grace **in** the very midst of it all. There is no *impatience* whatsoever in the psalmist, because there is no fear of his situation. And two psalms later, the psalmist writes, "... you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long." (*Ps. 25:5, NRSV*) For you I wait all day long.

And this brings us to the second cause of our impatience, according to Henri Nouwen: we so often desire, and wait for, *a particular outcome*; whereas waiting for God and trusting God, as the psalmist does, is open-ended. "Open-ended waiting is hard for us," Fr. Nouwen writes, "because we tend to wait for something very concrete, for something that we *wish* to have. Much of our waiting is filled with wishes: 'I wish that I would have a [better] job. I wish that the weather would be better. I wish that the pain would go.' We are full of wishes, and our waiting easily gets entangled in those wishes. For this reason, a lot of our waiting is **not** open-ended. Instead, our waiting is a way of controlling the future. We want the future to go in a very specific direction, and if this does not happen we are disappointed and can even slip into despair. That is why we have such a hard time waiting: we want to do the things that will make the desired events take place."² We want **our** results, which may – or may not – correspond with God's will.

Rather than wishes, Fr. Nouwen says, we should be filled with hope. "Hope is trusting that something will be fulfilled, but fulfilled *according to [God's] promises* and not just according to our wishes."³

Hope is trusting that, while our human knowledge and abilities can be powerful and effective, sometimes – more often than we think – the answer lies in letting nature take its course. For, if you are like me, you can easily forget that we live in what Richard Rohr calls "an enchanted universe" – a universe wherein, whether at the sub-atomic or cosmic or human level, God is present and active: ready and eager to bring healing, love, and new life – we know not how.

AMEN

¹ Henri Nouwen, *Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas*, Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing, 2001, pp. 27-37)

² Nouwen, *ibid.*

³ Nouwen, *ibid.*