

Seeds Sown and Grown

Read Mark 4:26-34

Wilke and Buck lived on adjoining farms. For the life of me I can't remember Wilke's first name, but I do remember he still had a bit of an immigrant's accent, probably German. Buck was a boyhood friend of my dad's who became a close friend to me when I was in my early 20s and spent a few years living on my grandmother's farm along with my new bride. I'd help Buck do farm work, mostly butchering hogs and making sausage until the wee hours of a winter night, and he would help me keep my '51 Chevy pickup truck on the road, supplying used parts from the junk yard that surrounded his house and barn and teaching me the required mechanical know how to do the work. Along the way we talked endless hours about politics, religion, philosophy, and just life in general. Buck was fond of retelling a conversation he had with Wilke about plowing his fields. Over a series of weeks as the seasons and the weather changed from winter to summer the dialogue progressed like this:

Buck: Hey Wilke, when are you going to plow that field?

Wilke: It's too dag-gone early to plow.

Time passed and the Spring rains fell.

Buck: Hey Wilke, when are you going to plow that field?

Wilke: It's too dag-gone wet to plow.

Spring gave way to early summer and the fields dried out and the temperatures rose.

Buck: Hey Wilke, isn't it about time to plow that field?

Wilke: It's too dag-gone hot to plow.

Finally high summer was upon them and....

Buck: Wilke, aren't you going to plow that field?

Wilke: It's too dag-gone late to plow.

Buck would always let go a laugh and take another slug of re-warmed coffee left over from the morning pot and scorched in the micro-wave. For Wilke, it was never the right time to do what he should have done. Buck always seemed to know what time it was.

I learned a lot about farming from Buck and a good deal about life in general too. Both endeavors, farming and living our lives in general take both art and skill, wisdom to accompany our knowledge, strength tethered to gentleness, courage seasoned with humility, and a great deal of patience and trust, and much plain old stick-to-it-iveness.

Living in a largely agrarian society, Jesus used many parables which drew upon the lives of the herdsmen, vine-dressers, and farmers that populated his immediate surroundings to teach people about the kingdom of God. His hearers lived close to the land so he used their knowledge of ordinary things to teach them extraordinary truth. We might do the same if the Garden State grew anything but sub-divisions with row after row of "McMansions," malls, and townhouses and condos by the thousands, all surrounded by acres of asphalt and concrete. If Jesus were among us to teach, he'd probably have a whole section of suburban parables for us. Let me throw in a little nugget of pastoral advice: this summer, get your Jersey corn and tomatoes while they still exist!

And speaking of fathers, which I wasn't but I am now, it struck me that there are a lot of similarities between how the kingdom of God grows and how fathering works, both for good and for ill. Since it's Father's Day, permit me to wander afield from Jesus' main purpose in teaching about the Kingdom of God and do a little midrash on fathering.

Let's take the worst first so as to get it out of the way. It's sad but not news that fathering is in bad shape in the lives of far too many children. Too many fathers don't get much further than planting seeds before disappearing, leaving their children to grow up fatherless and mothers going it alone along a very rough road. The wounds are deep and the deprivations are costly, financially,

emotionally, and spiritually. That's the worst of it and in too many cases the hurts are extreme. That's the extreme but there is more for us all to consider.

Since no father is perfect, just about everyone has some kind of "father wound" but some are much more deeply wounded than others. It makes a difference if your father is a forgiven sinner attempting to walk with Christ or is simply a sinner walking in the ways of unredeemed flesh. The good news is that our heavenly Father is perfect and is powerful enough to forgive us and cleanse us from our unrighteousness and to heal the wounds that we fathers inflict upon our children and to heal the wounds that both we and our children bring to God in faith and in prayer.

Now, teasing out some meaning from Jesus' parables about seedtime and harvest, let's look at some of the traits practiced by a good father.

First, someone scatters seed. Whether it is a man or God, the main point is that humans receive life as a gift. Seeds are potential wrapped up in a tight package just waiting for the conditions to arise to cause the mystery of life to spring forth. How the seed sprouts and grows is a wonder. A good father is first humble in the face of this gift. He realizes that he has been caught up in a sacred trust. He realizes that he is, as a father, not an owner but a steward. God has entrusted someone to his care that is very precious, not just to human parents, to fathers and mothers, but to God our Heavenly Father. Within such a sacred trust and such a significant responsibility there is no room for abuse. Good fathers must learn to be firm but not overbearing. It's a real challenge.

Second, like the farmer in Jesus' parable, fathers are expected to keep at it, to stay at their post, lying down to sleep, rising up in the morning, day after day, month after month, and year after year. It doesn't matter if he is tired, is up or down, or is depressed and frustrated by the difficulty of the job or not. With fathers who are good, there is no abandonment. To abandon a child entrusted to our care is tantamount to turning our back on God. A good father stays at his post.

Thirdly, just as Jesus says that a farmer watches his seed sprout and grow but doesn't know how it happens, a good father must learn to be at home in the mystery that being a father always involves. Whether the father knows how physical and spiritual development happens or not, he is called upon to support, to watch closely, and to participate in the life of his child in meaningful ways. Absence does not make the heart of a child grow fonder. Absence communicates, "You aren't worth my time or my involvement; I have more important things to do." To avoid setting up a family structure wherein a child feels abandoned, a father must be diligent to set godly priorities in the midst of all the pressures of making a living, paying the bills, and meeting all the other responsibilities that parents face every day. It's not easy, but it's worth it. Children need to place high on the list as ones who receive our energy, intelligence, imagination, and love.

Some fathers are not perceptive enough to perceive the mysteries involved in a growing human child. Many are not comfortable in realms where they don't know exactly what's going on. Good farmers know that they don't know everything, that they are involved in something much bigger than they are. Both farming and fathering involve knowledge and learned skills as well as intuitive arts. Fathers are forced to spend a great deal of time in places where they have no defined idea of what's going on. Men in general are not at home in helplessness and vulnerability. We are largely addicted to being in charge and to having the ability to figure things out and make them work the way we want. Need I point out to you how skilled children are at resisting being problems to be solved?

We men are schooled from a young age to have the answers, to know how to fix things, to demonstrate that in whatever arena we land we have what it takes to overcome and prevail. We too often reduce everything to roles and expectations. We expect our children to conform to our rules at all times and to achieve all sorts of goals to prove that they are worthy children who have risen above being a big disappointment because they didn't do what father wants. Fathers, aren't you glad our heavenly Father does not treat us so? Why then would we treat our own children so?

Fourth, a father must be nimble. Jesus uses the life cycle of a plant from seed to stalk to head to full grain in the head to ripeness to harvest to illustrate the phases of spiritual growth leading to the full manifestation of the Kingdom of God on the earth. He is teaching by way of this parable how to perceive the meaning of his ministry and how God is bringing his saving purposes to fulfillment in Jesus. But even though Jesus wasn't teaching them that day how to observe Father's Day, the analogy is still useful to us in considering the qualities that make a good father.

Any father who stays at his post long enough witnesses his child going through many different stages of spiritual development. And each stage requires an appropriate awareness from the father. He needs to know how to accept his child, their lessons, their failures, and missteps. He needs to keep on encouraging, gently teaching, and most importantly modeling a Christ-like life. He needs to keep on loving through seasons of disagreement and even strife as the child grows and separates to become his or her own person. Fathers are free not to like a child's choices, but in God, we are never free to stop loving and forgiving. We are not authorized to withhold the grace of God.

Seeds sown in God come to harvest. Fruit is born. People reach where they are predestined to go. Good fathers are helpers along the way of God.

Lastly, a good father knows that big, good things come from small beginnings. We also know that bad things can come from small beginnings. We have the power with our words and our deeds to do damage to vulnerable children or to pronounce blessings. Fathers should be careful to sow good seeds into their children's hearts and repent when we sow bad seed, knowing that all seeds have the potential to sprout and grow for good or for ill. It is a beautiful strength when a father can come to a child and say, "I was wrong; please forgive me." Or to say, "I'm sorry for the things I said; I didn't mean it."

Let me close with two personal stories. Before I came to Christ, let's just say I was not the model son. My father and I had sharp contention. Then I gave my life to Christ and shortly thereafter was called to the ministry. Early in my first church ministry my parents attended Avondale's annual retreat at Black Rock. At

one point we broke up into small discussion groups and in the course of that time I felt the Holy Spirit leading me to publicly ask forgiveness from my father who happened to be in my small group. I'll never forget how his eyes filled with tears and he turned and said to the group, "I never stopped loving him."

The second story took place when my dad was dying of liver cancer and lay in the hospital. I decided there was no time to waste and I was going to tell him point blank that I loved him. We didn't typically speak to each other in this way. I said directly, "Dad, I love you." And the great blessing to me was when he responded point blank, "I love you too." This time it wasn't to any group. He said it to me. It was just the two of us in a hospital room filled with hisses and beeps and tubes and monitors—in the midst of his dying he told me he loved me. It has meant the world to me and still does all these years later.

From that point on, I decided I wouldn't wait until I was on my death bed to tell my kids, point blank, "I love you and I'm proud of you. I love you no matter what." My parting shot to you fathers: go and do likewise. You won't regret it. And your kids will love it!

And today if you don't have a father present or you have one who is but can't seem to say it, know this: you have a heavenly Father who loves you more than any earthly father ever could. Each one of you is loved by God.