

Sermon for the Third Sunday After Pentecost: Mark 4:26-34

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Most of y'all know by now that I come from a line of veterinarians on one side and teachers on the other. I've got more vet stories than I could shake a cat at, gross moments and gallows humor to make for delightful dinner conversation, and a whole lot of mostly useless information about how to hold different critters so they don't bite you while getting their temperature taken. But this morning, mercifully, I'm more interested in the teacher side of my lineage. Grandma Mary was an elementary school librarian, and she was a hoot. She loved to dress up to get kids' imaginations flowing. She came to one of my classes once in full Little House on the Prairie get-up and taught us how to churn butter with an actual churn! I was the belle of the ball for the rest of the day 'cause I got to keep the bag full of butter, and I passed ritz crackers smeared with the stuff around like a bad kid passing notes. Uncle Bill taught High School English to both the AP and the Alternative School kids. For what it's worth, he and I look exactly alike, with the exception that he's got a head start on going gray. When I was in college, a person I'd never met before came up and asked if I was related to Bill Harness! Turns out, she'd been in one of his classes and, like all of his students, adored and kind of hated him all at once. He was strict and tough, but he loved his students and would do anything for them. And they loved him, partially for what they learned and partially for the caricature of a frontiersman they saw in him. My mom, Kathy, she taught junior high spanish and english before getting called up to the big leagues at a local college. She poured her heart into those classrooms and spent hours every night grading papers, learning new vocabulary, mapping out lesson plans after her original plans got all interrupted by snow days or in-service or a revelation about a random student. One day, she'd delight in making piñatas with her class, the next, she'd discover that a ninth grader didn't know how to read, didn't even know the alphabet, and the trajectory of her year'd shift dramatically.

I grew up among these teachers, all of whom also happened to be deeply religious people, too, and their faith bled over into their teaching. I don't mean to say that they preached from the classroom, no. But they did look at their work as God-given. And they looked at their work as an expression of their faith. Not as an opportunity to convert or anything like that, but as an opportunity to take what they said they were about in church and live into in the world. I remember one time I was talking with my mom about something we'd heard in church, something about visions, and I was confused. Even as a kid, the idea of visions sounded funky, like, how could that be real? And if it was real, how could a rational person put any kind of truck in it? So mom told me a story of a moment she'd experienced when she was early in her teaching career, a moment that would change how she taught, change how she kept the peace in her classroom, change how she saw her students and the trouble they'd sometimes cause.

It was sorta halfway through the day, in the middle of a rough week. For reasons she couldn't understand, all the students she knew would act out from time to time acted out all at the same time. Even her students that were normally good got sucked into the energy of the classroom, and they started acting out. Nothing she did had much of an effect, and she went home each day just heavy with exhaustion and unsure of how to regain control or even unsure of how to go back the next day. But she did, and round about Thursday or Friday, she had a back-and-forth with a particularly confrontational student, and she wasn't particularly proud of how she handled it. She was at the end of her rope but still she shouldn't let herself get so mad, and she slumped down behind her desk convinced that she'd never be able to make a life out of this kind of work. And then she looked at her students. And this is when my mom told me how normal folks can experience visions. And I'll admit at the get-go, this is gonna sound a little weird. Mom looked up from her desk and saw her students, sitting in their desks, but instead of unruly teenagers, she saw a room full of open wounds. I've asked her to clarify, and she really can't, she just knows that what she saw were open wounds sitting in the chairs her

students had occupied moments before. Only they were still her students. Open wounds, raw and painful and forced to be left out in the open right here in front of God and everybody. Her jaw dropped, no surprise, and she did a cartoonish double-take, blinked her eyes, and the wounds were gone, replaced by a bunch of testy teenagers.

That moment freaked her out, of course, and she wondered about her own sanity, but she also noticed the tightness in her shoulders had loosened, and she wasn't angry anymore. She felt different, like instead of it being her job to take the knowledge that was in her brain and then squeeze it into all of theirs, instead her job became more like a nurse in a burn unit. She was in that place to care for those students, to tend the wounds they all carried and ease their pain and offer up some knowledge along the way. I remember one time, mom and I were at Wal*Mart with a cart of rotisserie chicken, new sneakers, and a garden hose, and an adult I'd never seen came up to her and gave her the longest hug I've ever witnessed from a stranger. With tears in her eyes, she stepped back and said, "I never told you this when I was a kid, but I want you to know you changed my life. School was hard for me and home was harder. And you were the only adult that seemed to care how I felt. I became a teacher because of you." A few more pleasantries, and a few more tears from both of 'em, and we went on our way. Mom said, "that doesn't happen a lot, but it does happen just often enough to keep me going."

All this talk from Jesus about spreading seeds, and seeds sprouting, we know not how, and mustard seeds starting so small and growing into greatness, it actually feels like a lot of the work many of us do. My mom in her classroom threw seeds around all the time, and some of 'em actually took. Sometimes from what she'd worked hard on, sometimes from some one-off thing she said that meant the world to just one kid. In my role, I already have stories like these piling up, too. I have not seen a church full of parishioners turn into wounds in the pews, but I do know that we all carry something, some pain or shame or fear or sadness that needs tending. And I know I'm tossing seeds around all the time, too, and I'm grateful to know a few of them have sprung up, I know not how. I've had that same scene play out in the grocery store, but the funny thing is, when they tell the story of what affected them so deeply, it's almost always something I have no recollection of saying. I probably said it, I just don't remember. The grace gets spread whether I get it or not. There's something really lovely in that, and in my eyes, nothing short of miraculous. In spite of myself, in spite of the wounds I carry, something of God still takes root in what I get to do. And I know the same is true for all of you. Some of you are teachers, many of you dedicate your life to other work, but all of you encounter other people, shape them with your own presence, care for them, tend to them, and maybe even drop a few seeds along the way. And I know that each one of us drops a whole lot of seeds that don't do much of anything, but a few do take hold, we almost never know how, and when they do, they grow beyond anything we could've imagined.

And thank God. Thank God that all this can happen, thank God that it happens with us involved, and thank God that while it needs us to spread the seed, it doesn't require us to do the growing. That, I think, that is where God comes in. I'll put all this another way. In seminary, I had a professor who used to say that the church's job is not to convert people. That's God's work. Our job is to set the conditions of possibility for all that. We set the conditions of possibility. We open our own hearts, we tend the wounds we see, we make space for the ones we don't. We set the conditions of possibility. We spread the seeds, we share our love, we keep on offering all the support we can muster whether it takes root or not. We set the conditions of possibility. And rarely do we see the fruit. Or even if the seed sprouted in the first place. But if we're lucky, we'll get a random encounter in a grocery store once in a while, just often enough to keep us at it. That's the Kingdom of God. It's the beautiful work of loving God and loving God's people not because of what they will become but because they need that love now. Because setting the conditions of possibility isn't just work, it's loving care, it's cherishing what we do, and it's cherishing those who cross into our lives. Maybe something takes root we know

not how, or maybe it doesn't, but either way, every day we set the conditions of possibility by showing another person the love of God. And maybe, just maybe, something sprouts, we know not how.