

Lectionary: 1 Samuel 15:34-16:13 or Ezekiel 17:22-24; Psalm 20; 2 Corinthians 5:6-10-17, Mark 4:26-34

Be Faithful, Keep Planting

Portions in blue were taken or paraphrased from a Sermons That Work homily written for today by The Rev. Dr. Ada Wong Nagata, Priest in Charge and Director of Ah Foo Jubilee Community Center at Church of Our Savior, Manhattan, a bilingual congregation with English and Cantonese worship in Chinatown, New York.

Good morning and happy Father's Day. I want to wish a wonderful day to all our fathers here and also to those who aren't here with us. Let's all think on our fathers and what they meant to us... take joy in what we learned from them and in the security we felt in their loving arms.

I know there can be abusive, unloving fathers and if that was your lot, I'm so sorry. But take comfort in the knowledge that, above all, our Father in Heaven has an unending love for you and for all of us. A father's love is something to be treasured. And one thing you can say about fathers is that, generally, they appreciate a good joke ...

One time a little boy was asked to define Father's Day and he said, "It's just like Mother's Day,..... only you don't have to spend as much on the present."

Mark Twain said, "When I was a boy of 14 my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man learned in 7 years."

One father had a three-year-old daughter who was having trouble sleeping through the night. She'd often wake up several times in the night because she was afraid. Each time as he re-tucked her into bed, he would remind her that Jesus was with her and he would keep her safe.

Several nights in a row, she did this over and over again. Finally, one night, the dad asked her if she had prayed to Jesus to take her fear away and help her fall asleep.

"Oh, yes," she assured him. "I prayed to Jesus... and He told me to come and get you!"

There was a little girl who was frightened by a fierce thunderstorm. She cried out in fear and her father rushed to her bedside. As he held her in his arms, he explained that she didn't need to fear. God would take care of her because He loved her greatly.

"I know God will take care of me and love me," she replied. "But right now, Daddy, I want someone with skin on."

An old father living alone in the country wanted to plant his pepper garden, but the ground was too hard and he was too old to do the work. His only son who used to help him was, sadly, in prison for robbing a bank. The old man wrote a letter to his son and mentioned his situation: "Dear Jake, I've been very depressed lately because it looks like I won't be able to plant my peppers this year. You know how much your mother loved planting peppers this time of year, but I'm just getting too old to be digging up a garden plot. I know if you were here, my troubles would have been over. I know you would have been happy to dig the plot for me. Love, Dad."

A few days later he received a letter from his son: "Dear Dad, Don't dig up that garden! That's where I buried the THINGS! Love, Jake."

At 4am the next morning, FBI agents and local police arrived with lights flashing and dug up the entire area looking for the THINGS. They apologized to the old man after not finding anything and left. The next day the old man received another letter from his son. "Dear Dad, Happy Father's Day! Go ahead and plant your peppers now. That's the best I could do under the circumstances." Love, Jake.

This story is a good lead in to today's readings, which are [mainly about planting](#). [Most of us probably do not live on farms, but we might have some knowledge about the growth of plants.](#)

[We know that planting requires someone to sow the seeds. The seeds need to have soil, and the soil needs to be tilled and cultivated to allow the seeds to have space to germinate. There needs to be sufficient water and nutrients in the soil to nurture the seed. Therefore, people must apply water and fertilizer regularly in order for the seed to sprout into a small plant, gradually grow branches and leaves, and then bear fruit.](#)

[This seed-sowing and plant-growing seem to be simple and straightforward. Nevertheless, we know Jesus uses simple images for his message, but the message is never simple and straightforward.](#)

[Usually, when we plant the seeds, they are buried in the soil. They dwell in the darkness. While in the darkness, they may absorb nutrients from the fertilizers in the soil and go through transformation. How long will this transformation take place? We can guess, but do not know the exact timing. What exactly occurs in the darkness? We do not know. Will anything grow from the seed? We do not know that, either. As a matter of fact, the sower may put in the best fertilizer, water as often as he or she should, and tend to the seed passionately, but sometimes nothing grows from it. However, we have faith that something will grow from seeds and we plant them anyway.](#)

[That is what our first parable in today's Gospel is about: God's grace and our faith. The parable talks about the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is not far away, or in the future, after we leave the world, but rather like growing seeds. We need to be faithful planting the seeds of love and have faith in those God-given seeds. God created the seed, God will graciously take care of it. We just keep planting, keep proclaiming the good news of God's love.](#)

["...first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head."](#)

[Planting is a wonderful metaphor for our spiritual journey and spiritual growth.](#)

[When we first come to know God, it probably is because someone has planted the seed in us. We go to church to worship and listen to the messages, and to study the Bible and other teachings. We may join some fellowship, enjoy hospitality, hear and see the testimony of other Christians, and slowly understand the Word and the Way. After planting, the nurturing takes place. Eventually, some may be moved to accept God, whereas some may not. How long will this transformation take place? We do not know. There may be charismatic preachers or well-known theologians who inspire people and plant the seed, but most likely it is a friend's testimony that does so. The companionship of a regular parishioner can nurture us along our spiritual journey.](#)

For me, this planting and nurturing has occurred time and time again. Just like the cycles of the season, where seed are replanted and grow year after year, I have been replanted in my faith over and over.

First, it was my family taking me to church as a child. My young faith was nurtured in that community... in Sunday School, in the children's choir, in confirmation class. I had no doubt that God was our creator and Jesus our savior. I saw it in the faithful people around me.

In our Episcopal tradition, the decision to accept our Lord Jesus leads to Holy Baptism. The transformation has begun. During Baptism, the celebrant blesses the water and says, "We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit" It tells the candidates to bury their past lives after baptism.

Many of us were baptized as infants or children, too young to make this type of commitment for ourselves. But our parents and Godparents did that for us. Later, when we are more mature we commit ourselves again through confirmation or reaffirmation of our faith. For me, I accepted Jesus as a 12 year old when I was baptized and confirmed. Later, during my late teens and twenties, I fell away. But I was called back by my wife Judy, as we began a family of our own here in Bluemont. I reaffirmed my faith at St. Peter's and attended an Episcopal Cursillo weekend, where with fellow seekers, my faith was further nurtured... even to the point of being life changing. And then planted here at Good Shepherd by Chris Cunningham and nurtured later by Paul Theerman, I have seen my faith and commitment grow even further, surrounded by your faith and love and encouragement

This is like the metaphor of planting. Someone plants the seeds, but if the seed is not buried and never releases its old form, it is difficult to sprout into new shoots and have new life. Therefore, following our Lord Christ, we need to die from our old lives before we can be born again.

When the seed is buried in the soil, it dwells in the darkness. While in the darkness, it absorbs the nutrients from the fertilizers in the soil and goes through transformation. Our life journey can be the same. Sometimes it is when we feel buried in dark moments, surrounded by stinky manure, that we are actually receiving God's gracious blessings in our life. However, we may become afraid and reject the presence of God. Then we get choked by the darkness and the smelly environment and no spiritual growth occurs, as we will hear more about in later parables. It is by accepting the grace of God that we go through transformation and have new life. Eventually, the plant inside the seed will break through the soil and sprout into a small plant, grows leaves, flowers, then fruits. Endure the dark moments; a new life will come out of it.

In our other lessons, we also read about planting. In Ezekiel, a twig is planted and bears fruits. We might have thought that a young twig would not have a chance to survive since it has no root, but because of God's grace and love, it grows into a noble cedar tree and offers shelters to God's other creations.

Let us also look at the second parable in the Gospel. It talks about the smallest of all seeds growing to be the largest shrubs. These are about something small that turns out to be big and great—but this greatness is not about the product itself, but about its effect of offering protection and a resting place to others. In God's kingdom, anything is possible. The kingdom of God is not about material gain, but it is about God's love for us, and our love for God and each other.

In our reading from Samuel, David, Jesse's youngest son, is chosen by God to succeed Saul as the next king of Israel. In human eyes, David is the least likely of all to be their next ruler. The youngest son,

smaller by far than his brothers, a shepherd who plays the harp while tending the flock... surely he can't be our next king! Yet God's plans are often different from our own plans. And we come to know that from this small seed God, through his servant David, created a mighty kingdom.

The Eastertide is over; the Holy Spirit has come. During the Great Fifty Days of the Eastertide, the lections have been about love and the transformation of the followers of Jesus who once were doubtful, fearful, and nearly faithless. They had gone through dark times, but finally got over their fear and became leaders of the Church. They proclaimed the love of God to the ends of the earth.

The Most Reverend Michael Curry, the Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church, likes to talk about a movement. He says he heard someone talk about a revolutionary movement begun by Jesus of Nazareth nearly two thousand years ago. This movement was based on the unconditional love of God for the world. As he said in his "Fiery Sermon" at Prince Harry and Meghan Markle's royal wedding last month:

"Imagine our governments and nations when love is the way. When love is the way, then no child would go to bed hungry in this world ever again. When love is the way, we will let justice roll down like a mighty stream and righteousness like an ever-flowing brook. When love is the way, poverty would become history. When love is the way, the earth will be a sanctuary. When love is the way, we will lay down our swords and shields down by the riverside to study war no more."

I urge you to check out the Spring 2018 edition of Virginia Episcopalian, which has a great write up on Bishop Curry's message at the royal wedding and a feature called "Top 10 Under 20" about young people leading powerful ministries. These are shining examples of seeds planted in our youth and flourishing in God's kingdom.

Bishop Curry urges people to "go into the world, let the world know that there is a God who loves us, a God who will not let us go, and that that love can set us free." "This is the Jesus Movement," he says, "and we are The Episcopal Church, the Episcopal branch of Jesus' movement in this world."

So, do not be afraid of dark moments. Keep the faith. You are destined for rebirth, time and time again. Do not underestimate the small or weak, for God has a plan for God's creation. Let us keep planting and loving God, carrying on the Jesus Movement.

Let us pray (today's Collect)... "Keep, O Lord, your household the Church in your steadfast faith and love, that through your grace we may proclaim your truth with boldness, and minister your justice with compassion; for the sake of our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever." *Amen.*

Old Testament: Ezekiel 17:22-24

Thus says the Lord God:

I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out.

I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs;

I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain.

On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it,

in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar.

Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.

All the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord.

I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree;

I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.

I the Lord have spoken; I will accomplish it.

Psalm 92:1-4,11-14

1 It is a good thing to give thanks to the Lord, *
and to sing praises to your Name, O Most High;

2 To tell of your loving-kindness early in the morning *
and of your faithfulness in the night season;

3 On the psaltery, and on the lyre, *
and to the melody of the harp.

4 For you have made me glad by your acts, O Lord; *
and I shout for joy because of the works of your hands.

11 The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree, *
and shall spread abroad like a cedar of Lebanon.

12 Those who are planted in the house of the Lord *
shall flourish in the courts of our God;

13 They shall still bear fruit in old age; *
they shall be green and succulent;

14 That they may show how upright the Lord is, *
my Rock, in whom there is no fault.