

By Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Spread a table with fruit and vegetables and their seeds. Eat and enjoy the fruits and vegetables during your time together.

LEADER: Creator God, we know apple seeds grow into trees, bloom, and produce fruit. We watch beans sprout into new vines to feed us. Help us cultivate the seeds we cannot always see within us.

ALL: Open our eyes to your presence within us.

LEADER: Jesus, you teach us the reign of God is near, not far away and beyond our reach.

ALL: Open our eyes to your presence among us.

LEADER: Spirit of God, confound us and nudge us beyond any slights and sorrows to cultivate a community of love in our world.

ALL: Open our hearts and minds to your life among us.

To describe the kingdom of God, Jesus teaches in parables. In Sunday's gospel Jesus focuses on how seeds grow—the future within them. Just a few verses earlier, Jesus explains the seed is the word, his message (Mark 4.14). How does Jesus' word grow in us?

Every parent knows a child develops, begins to recognize faces, creeps, then crawls, and eventually walks. Our DNA wires us for unfolding development from fetus to full height and insight.

Preschool and kindergarten children take in everything

they see, hear, taste, touch. God is magic or a big parent person. By primary age children's brains develop concrete thinking power. They chain stories together "and then, and then" and in middle school become increasingly industrious learners of the concrete world.

Not until the teen and high school years does the brain develop abstract thinking skills that give us the capacity to interpret bible stories and symbols and explore doctrinal concepts.

As older adolescents, we may begin questioning our faith tradition.

Leaving home, college classes, church scandals, a friend or family member's death may challenge us to sort through what we believe, value, and stand for personally. Doing a faith selfie takes time. Working through who I am, what I will do, and who I love may absorb the 20s and 30s. Individuals tend to "either-or" thinking in these years. Many people stay at this stage of faith and identify with people like themselves.



In later decades of life many become generative Christians, secure enough in their faith and values to listen to others who differ and even be changed by them. They are "both-and" thinkers who live their faith and widen their views by walking with and learning from others. Researchers call this stage of faith agonistic, which expresses the struggle to understand people unlike ourselves.

Some believers as they age or face death become wisdom figures, embodying the word Jesus has planted in them, inspiring and energizing those in their circles.

● **What stage of faith development seems most like your own?**

GOSPEL

Jesus teaches about God's reign.



NARRATOR: Jesus spoke to the crowd in parables. He sat in a boat on the sea while they sat beside the sea on the land.

JESUS: This is how it is with the reign of God. A farmer scatters seed on the ground, goes to bed, and gets up day after day. Through it all the seed sprouts and grows without the farmer knowing how it happens. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, finally the farmer wields the sickle, for the time is ripe for the harvest.

NARRATOR: Jesus went on to say—

JESUS: With what can we compare the reign of God, or what image will help to present it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when planted in the soil, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet once it is sown, springs up to become the largest of shrubs with branches big enough for the birds of the sky to build nests in its shade.

NARRATOR: By means of many such parables Jesus taught people the message in a way they could understand. To them he spoke only by way of parables, while he kept explaining things to his disciples.

Mark 4:26-34

can ready the field, sow the seed, and sleep until harvest time. We depend on the miracle of life in seeds to grow and become food for us.

We live in a dynamic world in which all that is has the capacity to become more, to self-organize into new wholes. This image of growth calls us to value our own potential for outgrowing present flaws and immaturities. Like the seed our spiritual growth flourishes with our willingness to trust the potential and future within our real selves.

Like seed Jesus' teachings take root and grow in us. The person of faith realizes our lives of eating, sleeping, working, and playing are more than meets the eye. God is present in our lives in every here and now. God is the dynamic love energy out of which the cosmos evolves.

● What potential for creating wholeness do you find in evolution, our common story?

● What do you appreciate about remembering our evolving history?

Jesus is teaching about the kingdom of God in Sunday's parables. In our democracy *kingdom* is an out-of-fashion word. Christians believe God is three persons interrelating in one love, a community not a monarchy.

If one drops the letter *g* from the word *kingdom*, one gets a new word *kindom*, which tells us we are all related

Jesus teaches in parables.

On this the 11th Sunday in Ordinary Time, the Church resumes reading Mark's gospel semi-continuously. Jesus teaches in parables to awaken us to the potential of his word within us. The liturgical year cycles his teachings through our lives, calling us to open our minds and hearts anew to widening circles of others in our lives. Both parables this Sunday promise growth, the first from seed to abundant harvest, the second from seed to a shrub for birds.

The seed that grows while the farmer sleeps is not magic but organic. In the 13.8 billion years of evolution seeds have

learned to do this. They sprout, grow stalks, head out, and ripen because the sun warms them, rain waters them, and earth nourishes them. They inherit the power of the first bacteria that learned to fuel life, divide, and reproduce, bacteria that still function in our mitochondrial DNA to convert oxygen to energy.

We live in a long history of God's love unfolding in our evolving cosmos. Some four billion years ago simple cells appeared; two billion years ago cells with nuclei appeared. A farmer in Jesus' time and all of us who grow plants today inherit the leap from the ocean to land that early cellular life made. We

in God, a concept literally true when we understand Earth's evolving story. So, what if we hear Jesus asking, "To what can I compare the kin*dom of God?" Or, "To what can I compare our oneness in God?"

From the beginning Christians form communities, new wholes in which they become more together than they are individually. Like them, we break bread together in order to become bread for others as Jesus teaches.

● **When have you become conscious of belonging to the body of Christ?**

● **In what new emerging wholes or communities are you a part?**

In Sunday's second parable the tiniest of seeds grows into a great bush. In North America we know mustard as a weed that grows three to four feet tall but rarely sturdy enough for birds. Nonetheless the parable makes its point—potential. The person who sees a bush full of birds in a tiny seed is one who lives in the reign of God. Faith sees potential in ourselves and our world.

Perhaps the mustard bush is a comic image in the parable. The cedar in Sunday's first reading is a more imperial image, sturdiest of trees with lots of room for not only the birds of the air but the nations of the world. The image of a hearty bush suggests community



without the trappings of empire, a comic critique of aspirations to political greatness.

The Second Vatican Council made Catholics aware that previously we had thought about our Church as the embodiment of God's kingdom. But God's reign is larger than one institution, as much larger as the bush is than the seed. God's reign is hospitable to all.

Like the seed, the Church is alive and dynamic, an assembly (*ecclesia*), something like a town meeting of all those who have identified with each other and Christ. As Church, we experience the same problems that human beings contend with in relationships and communities. Change comes slowly. Leaders disappoint. Scandals cause some to sever any connection with Church. Others try to hold the tensions

and live authentic Christian lives. The Church grows toward the reign of God but isn't there yet.

Vatican II reminded us that our baptisms call every Christian to holiness. We have

the capacity to love and forgive, to heal and hope. These seeds of community building live within us. Each one of us can act and make change in our Church and world. We can sow new life in cooperation with the Giver of our lives, who works even when we sleep.

The vision of the leaders at the Second Vatican Council suggests that, as the branches of the mustard bush are big enough to offer shelter to the birds of the sky, so the arms of the Church are to be open, offering hope to all. And the Church, of course, is not other than us; it is all of us, already aware of the gift and task of living in the reign of God.

● **Make your own parable. The reign of God is like:**

● **What potential for creating unity and wholeness in the world do you see in the Church? What will you contribute to the work?**

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● **In 1981 three retired food engineers from General Mills and Pillsbury decided to pool their expertise to solve world food problems. Read their story at compatibletechnology.org. What global, or local, problem can you and your fellow retirees, families, or parish put your time and energy toward?**

God will side with the lowly.

The prophet Ezekiel in Sunday's first reading takes us back to a time in Israel's history when the monarchy is failing. A prophet and poet, Ezekiel was trained as a priest in Jerusalem before the Babylonians took him into exile among the first wave of captives in 598 BCE. He was married and relates the death of his wife with deep feeling (Ezekiel 24.26).

Ezekiel experiences God's presence with him in captivity. God calls him to eat a scroll of lamentations and woes, to speak to the rebellious people of Israel. Ezekiel urges Israel's king and people to take responsibility for breaking their covenant with God and worshipping other gods. Nonetheless, in 587 BCE, the Babylonians destroy Jerusalem and the temple and take a second wave of captives into exile.

For Ezekiel God is faithful, unlike the people. In Sunday's first reading the prophet envisions God replanting the people like a cedar twig. The tree is Israel, a captive people living through tragic loss and blame. In the midst of their hopelessness and powerlessness, Ezekiel proclaims that their just and holy God has already

begun their restoration. God says of Israel, "I myself will plant it."

Ezekiel promises God will transform the people. "I bring low the high tree. I make high the low tree. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish."

The future will be not merely a restoration of institutions, the city, and temple, but an interior regeneration, a new heart and new spirit within each individual person (Ezekiel 36.26).

The reign of God overturns our expectations and confounds our sense of being in charge. In this reign poor is rich, weak is powerful, have is have-nots, and justice is God's own.

Ezekiel's vision

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;

**A young cedar
of Lebanon.**



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 Holy One.
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 Holy One have spoken;
I will accomplish it.

Ezekiel 17.22-24

● **What replanting do we Christians need after the threatening events of 2021?**

● **How has the pandemic affected your sense of God's presence?**

● **What hopes are you planting in your family and neighborhood?**

PRAY

LEADER: Let us think about the small seeds we want to plant in our lives, in our world, seeds that can seem too little to influence the future, too slow growing to bear fruit, too unlikely to flourish in this climate, yet let each of us name a seed we want to plant.

Each names a seed.

LEADER: Let us go forth to see the people we meet this week with eyes of faith.

ALL: Bless us with insight to see more than meets our eyes. Amen.



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