

# The Diocese of West Tennessee Twenty-Seventh Annual Convention

*Closing Session*

*Mark 4:26-32*

*February 22, 2008*

There are numerous settings, signs, symbols and metaphors in nature that can be found throughout the Bible. Again, and again, the Gospels are full of stories and parables where nature is used to teach us about God and the Christian life. There are mountains, deserts, wildernesses, stones, sheep, doves, fig trees, fish and seeds like we find in our Gospel story today. Some of our most sacred symbols are found in nature – like the baptismal waters and the healing power of the elements of earth and oil. Most importantly, our Lord honored the Earth by choosing earthen elements to be the most sacred symbols of all — the bread and wine to represent the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In our Gospel reading today, we find two seed parables. The pairing of these two seed parables is one of the most encouraging and hopeful parables that Jesus uttered. The pairing of these two parables may suggest that Mark understood them as having similar messages or meanings. They seemed to be offered, in music terms, as two harmonious parts interacting to create a particular melody. In this case the melody or centralized themes of these parables appear to be a glorious song that proclaims the reign of God and the Kingdom of God. Together, the parables reveal messages of patience, hope and assurance. In fact, the collection of Jesus' parables in Mark 4 is often called the passages of "The Great Assurance". To those hearers in Jesus' time who were wondering about God's promises, these parables could give assurance that God is still in charge of the movement of the world and that the Kingdom of God would come. Despite appearances and experiences to the contrary ... the seeds of God's Word and our discipleship will bear fruit, and the Kingdom of God will triumph.

The first parable is known as the Parable of the Growing seed or also known as the Parable of the Seed Growing Secretly – that's my favorite! The secret and mysterious life of a plant and its growth is really quite extraordinary. It is beyond our ordinary understanding. The growth of a seed may be seen as something of a fantastic mystery as many of us remember the childlike wonder of watching the growth of a seed in our youth. What gardener today does not still have a sense of awe about the seemingly automatic growth of their seed plantings? The parable can be divided into three scenes: The first scene is the farmer sowing the seed. The second scene is the farmer going about doing ordinary things while the seed grows automatically – on its own. The third scene is the farmer harvesting the grain. These three scenes correspond to the three processes of sowing, growth, and harvest.

There are two worlds or dimensions that are at work here. One is the world of the tangible – it is our stewardship of the present, it is our stewardship in

the present Kingdom of God. This present Kingdom of God is not a heavenly, geographical area or place, it is here on earth, our island home. It is where we live, where we live our lives. The Kingdom of God is found in the dumps of Haiti, in the bush of Tanzania; the Kingdom of God is found between the pavements of Memphis, along the roads and countrysides of West Tennessee; the Kingdom of God is found in College campuses, in EfM groups and at St. Columba. The Kingdom of God is found in the little Haitian boy and in the tired Haitian mother. The Kingdom of God is found in a young lad named Andrew and in our Diocesan youth. The Kingdom of God is found in the “already”, the “now” that is found in the farmer’s planting of the seed. The other dimension is the work of the cosmos or the unseen hand of God, the eschatological process of the “not yet” until the final days of harvest.

There is an intrinsic tension between the contrast of the two worlds and the existential waiting in the unknown. It is within this tension that many Christians get impatient and get in over their heads. As the parable illustrates, the farmer plants and then he leaves it alone – he leaves it to the mysterious forces of the cosmos; he leaves it to God. Jesus is saying that just as we need to surrender to the natural order in growing seeds, in the Kingdom of God, we need to surrender to the reign of God — that God is in control, not us. The sowing of the tiniest seed or the sowing of any of our faith efforts begins a process over which we just do not have control.

Some years ago I wanted to have the perfect tomato and herb garden. I did my research on how to grow a perfect garden; I ordered my seeds from a pedigreed mail-order catalog; I carefully prepared just the right soil and finally planted the seeds. I watched the progress several times a day always evaluating the moisture of the soil and the colorization of the new-growth of the leaves. I continually watered and watered. When the leaves looked yellowed or wilted, I would add more fertilizer. And then — the garden looked as if Agent Orange had drifted over the garden area. What happened? In trying to control the result, I ruined the process – I ruined the garden by messing with it and by “meddling”. I over did it! The parable is telling us that we have to trust God – let go of trying to control the results or outcome of our faith efforts and let God be in control of the seeds of our stewardship. Allow the mysteries of God to work in our lives and in the lives of others. We must have faith that God is working in his Kingdom.

One of the classic interpretations of this parable about allowing the seed to grow was written by Martin Luther when he said about this text that after he carefully prepared his sermon and preached it with passion and pounding fist, he would return home and drink a glass of Wittenberg beer and just let the Gospel take its course. Luther clearly understood that the true power of his sermon and his efforts was determined by the power of the Word and the Holy Spirit. This parable gives us an umbrella assurance, a sort of umbrella insurance, that we don’t have to worry or be anxious because God is in charge; he is in control. What our faith efforts may bring – what God has begun in us, he will complete. What freedom this brings! What burdens may be lifted when we accept this blessed assurance. Brothers and sisters, do not fear! Stand firm in

the faith that God's reign continues and that his kingly rule continues to grow. It is God's power, not our power, on which the Kingdom depends. God's will and abundant grace does not depend on human effort.

God does, however, call us to participate in God's mission. Parables always invite our participation. Throughout this convention and during the Bishop's address, we have been called to the mission of the Church. The Bishop has given us a carefully prepared canvas and has invited us to make the beginning brush marks that can transform a blank canvas of opportunities into a Masterpiece for the Kingdom of God. Like the Parable of the Mustard Seed, let even our small plantings be transformed into a full harvest as a gift to the Kingdom of God. So let us pick up our brushes and carefully select our paints. Let us prepare the soil and plant our seeds. But first, after these convention efforts of toil and preparation, let us first go to our homes, have a Wittenberg beer, or an herbal tea, and allow God to work and reign in our hearts, in our lives, and in the lives of others. And let us also give thanks to a God who graciously created a fruitful earth and for all of God's abundant and good gifts to us.

Let us Pray:

"O God, whose kingdom is growing powerfully in our midst,  
Let us marvel at that life which flourishes among us.  
In your Son we receive life abundantly and forever.  
Make us share his firm assurance  
That at the end all things shall be well and wonderfully well."

—*Gerald O'Collins*

Amen.