

Hard-Working Seeds

June 13, 2021 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Psalm 90:1-2, 12-17

Mark 4:26-34

Will you pray with me?

*God, help me to sort out the tangles and untie the knots of your Word
in a way that pleases you and speaks to those listening.*

Amen.

Three weeks ago, I fell off my bicycle. The full weight of my body landed squarely on my left ankle. As I sat there, stunned, I felt a wave of pain swell up in my foot and move up my leg. I knew it was bad. Luckily, I was not alone; my husband Chris was behind me, and we were at the entrance to the trail, next to a side road about a mile from our house. Chris was able to bicycle home, put the bike rack on the car, and come back to help me hobble a few yards from the root-strewn path to the front seat of the car. As I waited for him to return with the car, noticing the bloody scrapes on my arm and shifting my body every which way to find a comfortable position, all I could think about was how I wouldn't be able to take my walk the next day.

Let me back up. About six weeks before my bike accident, I discovered the pedometer on my iPhone. (I know, I know, you're wondering, "How had she not known that her phone was tracking her every move?") Well, I looked back on what my phone had logged for my steps over the past year, and, let me just say, I was a little shocked. I knew that working from home meant a lot of sitting at my computer - zooming and emailing, laying out the bulletin and developing new communications strategies. I knew that some days, especially when the weather was bad, and my son was doing remote school from the dining room, I didn't always leave the house. But to see that bar graph on my phone, showing me just how few steps, I was taking, week after week, month after month, I was really brought up short.

So, I started walking. I began with a short loop down the Minuteman Bikeway, which runs behind my house, and back through some conservation land. It took me about 30 minutes, 25 if I paid attention to the speed of my stride. I walked in silence, listening for the peepers and woodcocks that announce the

arrival of spring. I checked my phone at the end of each walk to see how many steps I'd gone, and how high the bar was, compared to the other days of the week. I started extending my walk, trying to reach the next big round number of steps. I began listening to podcasts as I walked, and I found myself passing by my house to take another short loop in the other direction, just so I could finish the story I was listening to. Pretty soon, I was checking my schedule each day to see when I could fit in my new 60- to 75-minute walk.

My walk had become a central element to my day, around which I planned my church work and my house work, my family time and my personal time. My daily walk made me feel strong and happy and in control. So, as I sat on that path with my bruised and swollen ankle, waiting for Chris to return, knowing that my walking routine had just been upended, I was devastated. I let the tears stream down my face as I faced the realization that I had lost control, once again.

Living through this Covid year has meant losing control in so many ways - from hunkering down in our homes and shifting all our connections online, to navigating an ever-changing stream of research, recommendations, and regulations - and watching in horror as waves of infection crashed with terrifying speed and intensity. With each change and shift, we have had to find a new balance to our days, a new rhythm and routine. And just when we're into the groove of a new rhythm of life, something changes - CDC guidelines, school department regulations, family expectations - and the groove is gone.

I know that I'm not the only one who lost her footing - pun intended! - during this Covid year. First Church parents of children and adolescents have struggled - struggled with remote schooling, with managing stress and anxiety, with finding time to meet all the demands of parenting, working, caring for older relatives, and, last and usually least, caring for ourselves.

We've been thrown off balance by a pandemic that has touched us all, parents and non-parents alike, but in very different ways. A pandemic that left some of us living in depressing isolation, longing for human contact, while some of us were longing for just one moment when a needy child wasn't trailing us into the bathroom or climbing into our bed when they couldn't sleep alone. A pandemic that revealed just how much emotional labor it takes to manage a household and how that emotional labor goes unrecognized and unpaid and - yes, I will say it - falls pretty squarely on the backs of mothers in most families.

We've been thrown off balance by a pandemic that shone a spotlight on the inequities in our society that allows billionaires to thrive on unheard-of profit margins, while the middle class and working poor sink deeper into debt and insecurity. A pandemic that has decimated disenfranchised communities where health care access is tenuous and disinformation campaigns are strong, where the luxury of quarantining is challenged by overcrowded homes and the demands of essential worker jobs that pay the bills. A pandemic that hit Black and brown families with a force built up over generations of discrimination that is written into our policies and programs.

But it's not just us grown-ups that have been thrown off balance; consider the children. Kids of every age and developmental level felt the effects of this time acutely. They lost opportunities for social learning in the important feedback loops of their peer groups. They faced confusing new ways of schooling from home. They missed out on rituals and celebrations that mark each year - the 5th grade camping trip, the 8th grade trip to D.C., the preschool moving-up ceremony, the high school graduation surrounded by large crowds of extended family and friends. They put up with less-than-ideal substitutes for the making of their childhood memories.

All of this is why today's readings feel so right for this Sunday when we mark the end of our program year under Covid. And in particular, it's the way these texts are translated in *The Message*, with its American slang and idioms written in a contemporary style, that hits home for me today. I want to lift up just a few verses and phrases that seem to speak to the year we've had.

Psalm 90 starts by stating the immensity of God, praising God for being "our home forever," "from 'once upon a time' to 'kingdom come.'" But soon the Psalmist gets down to it: "...come back, God... and treat your servants with kindness for a change... Make up for the bad times with some good times; we've seen enough evil to last a lifetime." Sounds to me like the Psalmist is exhausted! Enough, already! We need a little kindness after all these hard times!

And then, the final verse: "Affirm the work that we do!" Let us know, God, that you see us doing the best that we can, and that we are enough. After this year, we might need to see that affirmation from God written in neon letters in the sky, like the sign next door on the Sheraton Commander Hotel.

Jesus might be providing the affirmation we seek in the first of the two short parables in our second reading. Jesus describes how the kingdom of God is “like seed thrown on a field by a man who then goes to bed and forgets about it. The seed sprouts and grows - he has no idea how it happens.” Day after day, night after night, the seeds grow, nurtured by the earth where they were flung. There’s no mention of special fertilizer or farming methods. In fact, Jesus tells us it feels like a bit of a mystery to the one who did the planting. Growth happens, but we don’t know how.

You know what I think? I think those seeds worked hard! It sounds as if they were scattered without much thought by a farmer who was a bit hands-off. But still, they grew: a green stem, then a bud, then the ripened grain. And Jesus is calling those seeds the kingdom of God! They are doing what they can, growing a little bit each day, living as best they know how.

This Covid year certainly scattered us on unfavorable ground. It felt at times like we were left alone to figure out how to survive during a pandemic. We tried some things, and then we pivoted and tried other things. We built routines and then shifted to different routines. We found ways to feel in control, and then found ourselves thrown off balance and struggling for control once again.

Last Sunday, I hosted a conversation on the Church School Zoom with a small group of First Church kids. We looked back on our year of Remote Church School, picking out favorite moments and remembering things that made us smile or laugh. I edited down the recording to share the highlights with you today. As you watch, listen for the ways in which these courageous kids found joy and connection in their online formation. Listen for the things that didn’t go as we expected, and how we found meaning and humor in the failures. Notice how the younger one’s wiggle and squirm but persevere until the end. See how they all sprout and grow.

Apologies in advance for the wonky audio... think of it as an example of how the struggle to connect this year was real... Kevin, please share the video...

So, kids, let me say it again:

I am so proud of you all.

You have faced so many hard things over this past year.

You have been disappointed, you have been lonely, you have been angry, you have been anxious, you have been sad.

And,

you have tried new things.

You have dug into activities that helped you forget the weirdness of life.

You have worked on your drawing skills.

You have crafted and made gifts for family and friends.

You've put together playlists of your favorite music artists to share with friends.

You've connected with friends through online gaming.

You've spent time exploring local parks and conservation lands.

You've read a lot of books.

You've had a lot of family movie nights.

You have sprouted right where you were planted in this Covid year, in conditions that might not have seemed ideal for growth. Yes, you have grown! You may not know how it happened, but God does. God has blessed you and held you through it all, and God affirms you and loves you just as you are - from "once upon a time" to "kingdom come."

Amen.

