

“A sure harvest”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Mark 4:1-20

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Parenting has taught me many things: patience, gratitude, how to be a child again. It’s also taught me something I thought I had learned but am only now beginning to understand: futility. I can make all the cute and funny sounds I want, I can sing till the dog starts howling, I can contort my face and stick out my tongue, I can jump up and down or whisper love, and none of it will make Emerson sit still for a diaper change if he doesn’t want to. I can glue my eyes to him, catch him a thousand times as he tumbles, but the moment I turn away for one second is the moment he’ll fall and hurt himself. Futility. Macbeth and his “tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing” has nothing on a dad.

The hard thing about being a parent is that you feel like you’re always messing up. Of course, the same could be said for life. Relationships fail. Jobs end. Backs break. You pour yourself into something or someone, you give it your all, and still, it all comes back to you broken.

That’s what we’re going to talk about today. The fervent, fearsome feeling that somehow, in some way, we’ve failed. The feeling that, in the end, our effort didn’t matter.

I think of Vincent Van Gogh (or, “van Gokh”). Here’s a man who took his own life, believing he was a failure. A man who loved art, loved light and color, loved this amazing, wondrous world, loved even the hurt, the grief, who created more than 2,000 works of art—and who sold only one painting his entire life. A man who believed that the world would never know itself through his eyes.

There’s a song by Don McLean called “Vincent,” and in it, he sings, “Now I think I know what you tried to say to me / and how you suffered for your sanity / and how you tried to set them free / they would not listen, they’re not listening still / perhaps they never will.”

Vincent lived that feeling of futility, but I think we all get there at some point. In our passage from Mark today, Jesus’ disciples have just arrived.

Jesus has just finished appointing the twelve. They are excited! Finally they have found a truth that has put a fire in their bones. It’s like a film has been wiped from their eyes, and they can see the world for what it is, see the pain no one has acknowledged and the beauty, the grace, no one knew. Like Vincent, they can’t wait to fling their colors on canvas and show the world.

And what happens? No one believes them. Worse, no one cares. Jesus is kicked out of the synagogue, and his own family grabs hold of him because they believe he’s gone insane. The message—the message they had given up everything for—seems to have failed.

Jesus sees the despair in their eyes, and he knows it’s only going to get worse; Calvary still waits, a cross and betrayal. And so Jesus tells them a story about failure. His very first parable in the Gospel of Mark.

In this story, some of the seed falls on beaten paths, where it cannot grow and is quickly eaten by birds. In other words, there are people and moments when no matter what we say, what we do, the message just won't get through; they aren't interested.

Another portion of the seed falls on rocky ground and is burned by the sun, dying quickly because it has no roots. These are people who embrace the message but only its surface and give up when life gets hard and scorches their unexamined, unrooted faith.

A third portion falls among thorns, until they are choked. These are people and moments packed with so many interests, cares, and hurts that they just don't have room.

Yet somehow, some of the seed survives. Some find their way to good, deep soil. An unexpected remnant gives rise to a harvest that is not only abundant but miraculous. A farmer in those days was lucky if he got a tenfold harvest, but a thirty-, sixty-, and one hundredfold harvest? That was unheard of.

That's grace.

How is this possible? The Sower didn't seem to do much. He seems a bit reckless, and isn't mentioned again after the first sentence. The soil might be good, but there's nothing special about it. It's just soil. The only thing left is the seed. Jesus says that the seed is the Word, not just the gospel, but Jesus Christ himself, God herself, the *Logos*, the creative energy that birthed the world in beauty and wonder, the love that breathed life into us and gave us soul.

We are the sower. Each of us is given this pile of seeds—all this amazing beauty and wonder and love inside us, God in us—and all we are asked to do is toss it to the wind. We don't control the soil any more than we can control other people or the events of life. That's not our job. All we do is take these divine seeds and share them. Preach the gospel. Love somebody. Climb a tree. Cry justice. Parent a child. Paint a canvas.

The rest is up to the seed. The rest is up to God.

Somewhere in that failed soil, God will find a way, not by bulldozing through rocky ground, not by force, but by looking for the cracks, for wherever there's room enough, to grow.

There is comfort in this as we walk with Christ to the cross, as we face his rejection and betrayal, as we behold his apparent failure, for we can trust that in the cross there is a seed that will bloom, even if we do not yet see it.

The Jewish Talmud tells us, "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

Ours is not to worry about Calvary or Easter; ours is just the love we give today. But maybe it helps to know that Easter does follow Calvary.

There's an episode of the BBC show "Doctor Who" in which the Doctor goes back in time and meets Vincent Van Gogh. The Doctor knows the pain that Vincent carries, and so he does something rare: he whisks him away in his little blue box to Paris, 2010, the Musee d'Orsay, home of some of the greatest paintings in history.

As Vincent walks into this massive place of marble, his red hair flashes in amazement. He stumbles into a room lined with paintings—his paintings. A room full of people, children sitting on the floor, staring; students taking photos and sketches; people talking, crying, gazing, seeing the world through his eyes, like he never thought they would. People listening, like he never thought they would. And then he hears the curator say, "To me, Van Gogh is the finest painter in the world... I'm certain the most popular great painter of all time, the most beloved. His command of color, the most magnificent. He transformed the pain of his tormented life into ecstatic beauty. Pain is easy to portray, but to use your passion and pain to portray the ecstasy, joy, and magnificence of our world, no one had ever done it before, perhaps no one ever will again. To my mind, that strange wild man who roamed the fields of Provence was not only the world's greatest artist but also one of the greatest men who ever lived."

Vincent kisses the curator and holds him in a long hug.

After Vincent is returned to his time, the Doctor's companion is sure they've just changed history and will find hundreds of new paintings. The Doctor tells her, no, in fact Vincent still went on to take his life. She cries, "We didn't make a difference at all." The Doctor pauses and answers, "I wouldn't say that. The way I see it, every life is a pile of good things and bad things. The good things don't always soften the bad things, but vice versa, the bad things don't necessarily spoil the good things."

Jesus couldn't have said it better. No Easter can remove the pain of the cross. No harvest can remove the grief for the seeds that did not grow. But no matter how deep and dark the earth, no matter how great the thorns or how rocky the path, no matter how tall the cross or heavy the stone, God will emerge. Christ will rise. Our children will laugh.

Today, you will receive seeds of your own. In these seeds, I want you to see the deeds of love, the deeds of courage and wonder, the deeds of faith and gospel, which reside within you. May you share them even when it appears hopeless.

In them may you hear the words etched into a wall on a children's home in Calcutta:

"People are unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered. Love them anyway.
If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Do good anyway.
If you are successful, you win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway.
The good you do will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway.
Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be honest and frank anyway.
What you spent years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway.
People really need help but may attack you if you help them. Help people anyway.
Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best you've got anyway."

So go ahead. Take your seeds and let them fly. God will do the rest. **Amen.**