Mark 4:26-34

“Seeds of Potential”

Two inexperienced hunters decided to go hunting in the woods nearby to their homes. Before they left, they acquired the correct licenses, and procured all the gear they would need. The local game warden met them at the local outfitters and knew the two hunters were going on their first expedition, so he warned them about the danger of getting lost. He told the two men that during hunting season he patrolled the woods they would be hunting in, on a regular basis.

He told them that should they get lost, they should simply fire three shots in the air in rapid succession to gain his immediate attention. Sure enough, on their first day out the two hunters got thoroughly lost. One of them said to the other, “Remember what the warden said? You’d better fire three shots.” So he fired three shots into the air. They waited an hour or so, and no sign of the warden. So three more shots were fired. Still after another hour no sign of the warden.

Again the first hunter turned to the second and said, in great distress, “I guess you had better fire three more shots.” His companion said, “I can’t. I’ve run out of arrows.” To describe this little incident in one word I would choose the word “futility”. Nothing is more frustrating than exerting a great deal of energy or resources, to gain little or nothing at all. Actually, as someone who loves fishing, I am well acquainted with futility.

I have had many a day on the water, trying my best to lure in a fish, only to catch nothing or something of the size for a sardine can. Futility is best described in the Greek myth of Sisyphus who was forced by the gods to continually roll a boulder up a hill. How often have you worked on a project only to decide “This is a complete waste of time”? One of my favourite demonstrations of futility comes from the National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation movie, where Clark Griswald spends hours and hours in the cold, hanging an enormous amount of Christmas lights on his house.

When he believes he is finished, he drags the family out for the big house lighting, only to not have one of his thousands of bulbs light up. His ever encouraging mother-in-law, states the obvious in a cruel way, “I hope you kids see what a waste of time this was.” In the same vein I recently was at my mother-in-law’s watching her neighbour dig out dandelions from his lawn, all the while observing that the empty public lot next door to him, was flush with future seed producers not a few inches from his lawn.

Futility. It’s awful but also very common. You may not even realize that a whole book of the bible is dedicated to a contemplation on futility. In the book of Ecclesiastes, King Solomon, who had every advantage in life, writes this assessment. “Everything is meaningless, utterly meaningless!” He goes on in Ecclesiastes to describe the futility of wisdom, work, wealth, political power, and even life itself.” What an odd attitude to life, especially for a guy like Solomon.

Actually, maybe it isn’t so surprising. I was reading something rather interesting as it is disturbing. Suicide rates in North America have not changed for decades, while other causes of death of declined.

In our logical thinking we would think that poor, marginalized people would be more prone to suicide. It makes sense. When you struggle to simply cope with your day to day existence, you might be inclined to end it all. However, statistics disprove that theory. The majority of suicide attempts are made by people who have good jobs, families, even a great deal of wealth. Psychiatrist speculate that the reason this is true is because people in poverty, or in other struggles have someone else to blame for their unhappiness.

They can blame the government, their luck, or their upbringing. If you have all the benefits of a good life there is no one to blame for your unhappiness. It seems that happiness is not achieved by attaining the “good life”. Which is exactly what Solomon was trying to say. Needless to say, we all know from experience that the feeling of futility is devastating.

It is especially an awful feeling when it arises in our contemplation of the work of God’s kingdom. Yes, futility is something Christians, and the church, are well acquainted with. And I think you are not greatly surprised by this statement. Christians are not immune to feelings of futility. Perhaps you will remember in Matthew 11 a demonstration of feelings of futility. Surprisingly, John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah is feeling very discouraged.

At this point he has been arrested, and eventually he will be beheaded by Herod. Yet, this is not what discourages him. For even a prophet of God can feel like his efforts are all in vain. He sends his disciples to ask Jesus directly, “Are you the one; the Messiah. Or should we look for another?” John was wondering is his preaching and baptizing, all done to prepare the way for the Messiah was a futile gesture. How often have we felt the sting of discouragement, when we think of all the effort, resources, and time: spent on programs and outreach, and yet there seems so little show for it?

Jesus wanted us to bear fruit for him, but frankly we wonder, where is it? Jesus promised that we would do greater things than he did, so why does it feel like we are spinning our wheels? I wonder if Jesus had any idea of some of the challenges we would face, especially this one we call futility. Was he aware of how challenged our confidence would be? Well, actually he does talk about it in our gospel lesson today, particularly the first couple of verses.

This parable, or illustration of a farmer who planted seeds in his field and then just left things to be, is unique to Mark. It only occurs in this gospel. It may surprise you to learn that I don’t think I have ever preached on this little parable, because often when this passage comes up, one is drawn immediately to the second parable about the mustard seed. The mustard seed parable is much more famous, and many of us are well acquainted with it. But I wonder; why does Jesus include this other illustration?

Clearly, it is intimately connected to the previous story of the sower, but what does the illustration mean? Why is it relevant? The illustration is actually quite simple, and immediately understood by just about anyone. In an action still relevant today, a farmer goes out in the spring, and plants seed in his field. That’s all he does. Actually, that is all he can do.

Unlike today with fertilizing and pesticide spraying, farmers in Jesus’ day were limited in what they could do to enhance their yields. The farmer finishes his seeding, and then Jesus says he goes on to other activities. Maybe he has a vineyard to tend, or livestock, or maybe he goes fishing: it doesn’t really matter, because the point is that after sowing the seeds he doesn’t just sit in his field and wait. Without any help from the farmer, the rains come and the sun shines, and the seeds sprout.

A first, and this is exciting for all gardeners and farmers, the new shoots push out of the soil. Then the wheat shaft grows, finally producing a grain head. In the warm sunshine, the grain yields ripen and then dry. This marvelous process, which we all take for granted, goes on whatever the farmer is doing. He can literally be twiddling his thumbs on his front porch and the grain will grow.

The illustration continues because we learn that the next time the farmer has anything to do with his crops, is when they are ripe for the harvest. Between seeding and harvest, the farmer has no involvement; none, nada, zilch. The success of his crop is out of his hands. There is no point in the farmer sitting in a chair, watching the grain grow. To do so would be a waste of time and energy. It would be a futile exercise. The farmer must trust the natural processes as God created them.

Now, I know what you are thinking, “That’s some good advice for the farmers among us”. Maybe even good advice for those among us who like to dabble in some gardening. Watching the daises doesn’t help them grow. If we found a farmer sitting in the middle of his field watching the grain grow we’d think he was a few bales short of a load. The point is, the grains growth is out of our hands. However, we are experienced enough to know, that Jesus’ illustrations and parables are not about the literal picture of what is going on. Jesus is always trying to make a point about the Kingdom of God.

So, what’s the point? Clearly it was important enough for Mark to include it, so perhaps we shouldn’t just breeze past it this time, and go on to mustard seeds. Well, we know from early in this chapter that seeds represent the message of the Kingdom, or even as the next illustration demonstrates, the kingdom of God itself. The farmer, as the sower was previously, is the one who spreads the Good News. In other words we are the ones called on to sow. As in the parable of the sower, we are not responsible for where the seed falls, and there is an unlimited supply of seed, so sow to your heart’s content.

Toss the good news everywhere, even places where in your own judgment it will not sprout. Now here is the specifics of today’s illustration. It would be real easy for a farmer to sow his seeds and then at some point go down to his or her field and become discouraged. If we were the farmer we could start fretting. Perhaps the seed doesn’t sprout as quickly as you would like, or the crops do not grow as you would like. Perhaps there are some dead patches in the field, where nothing grows at all. Maybe some weeds have sprouted choking the good seeds out. Sometimes it can seem like a futile thing this sowing.

Maybe you planted what you thought were Baptist seeds, only to see Pentecostal plants growing. This illustration is Jesus’ way of telling us to stop worrying about the things we have no control over. The Holy Spirit helps the seed sprout and grow, not us.

Seeding is something we do in the midst of our regular lives. Remember the farmer sowed his seed, and then went onto other activities. For us those activities may be work, family commitments, or something else. Once we have sown and maybe watered as the Apostle Paul suggests, our work is done. That is our role in the Kingdom of God; to sow. The problem occurs when we look at the people we have sought to sow the good news into, and we see little signs of it taking root or growing. This observation might tempt us to despair. We might think our efforts are futile.

In our modern muddled thinking, we are prone to concern ourselves with securing success. We want results, especially results that come from our own hands. We long to celebrate lives changed as a result of our outreach and evangelistic efforts. We become ecstatic when lost souls come faith, but unfortunately we forget whose saving work achieved this. The salvation of souls never, ever, rests with me, or you, or even the church. It always and forever rests with Jesus.

Salvation is a gift of grace. If I cannot earn it for myself, then I certainly cannot work to gain it for anyone else. Our call in life is not to success, it is to faithfulness. We are to be faithful sowers of the seed regardless of whether we ever see any results. When, we do see results that too is a gift. It is a little dispensing of grace that God can use to encourage us to keep sowing. What we need is trust. We must trust God to take our sowing and do great things from it.

We must have vision that our efforts to share his love and grace are never ever futile. Perhaps we need to meditate on the prophet Isaiah a little bit. God called Isaiah to sow. Sow seeds of hope to a despairing people. Then in Chapter 55 we read the following…

 “*My thoughts are completely different from yours”, says the Lord. “And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts. The rain and snow come down from the heavens and stay on the ground to water the earth. They cause the grain to grow, producing seed for the farmer and bread for the hungry. It is the same with my word. I send it out, and it always produces fruit. It will accomplish all I want it to, and it will prosper everywhere I send it.”* (Isa. 55:8-11)

Some translations render this one phrase that God’s word will not return void. In other words, God’s word distributed is never a futile exercise. It all comes down to a matter of trust. Do we trust God to love and save this world or do we think we have to take over. I came across a good illustration of trust when I read about Gladys Aylward, who was a missionary to China more than fifty years ago when the Japanese invaded Yangcheng.

She was urged to flee but refused to leave the orphans behind that she cared for. With only one assistant, Gladys led more than one hundred orphans over the mountains toward Free China. In their book *The Hidden Price of Greatness*, Ray Besson and Renalda Mack Hunsicker tell what happened. During the escape Gladys grappled with despair as never before. After one sleepless night, she faced a morning with little hope of reaching safety.

A thirteen year old girl in the group reminded her of their much-loved story of Moses and the Israelites who were pursued by the Egyptians and then miraculously crossed the Red Sea. “But I am not Moses,” Gladys cried in desperation. “Of course you aren’t,” the girl said, “But Jehovah is still God. When Gladys and the orphans made it through safely, they proved once again that no matter how inadequate we feel, God is still God, and we can trust him. (Fresh Illustrations for Preaching, p. 210)

Our feelings of futility or inadequateness are just that, our feelings. We must own up to them. God is still God, no matter what is happening to us or around us. We must have faith enough to expect and accept his marvelous Kingdom, as God unfold it. Even the tiniest seed of his Kingdom, has the potential to grow into something incredible. It isn’t up to my efforts, my wisdom, my character, or righteousness to save anyone. All I am called on is to be faithful to the one who saves us all. And frankly isn’t that a relief to not have such a huge burden on us.