

The parables we hear today remind me of science experiment I did when I was in elementary school. I planted seeds in 10 paper cups that were filled with soil. And every day I would feed the plants. I fed water to only one. The others got orange juice, Diet Coke, coffee, soapy water... I can't remember all of the variables. But I do remember the outcome – to my surprise, they all grew just fine.

The parables we hear Jesus tell today is not one of his usual parables. It's more like science than a good story and more like science.

Normally, Jesus, like any good teacher, brought his lessons to life with language and illustrations that would be familiar to his people. Fishing, sheep-herding, farming. He knew his audience and their context.

And normally his stories included plot twists and metaphors and riddles that would leave people wondering, "What does this mean?"

But that's not what we get today. In fact, compared to some of his other stories, you might even say that these ones are downright boring.

The seed is planted. The plant grows. That's it.

There's no problem with the soil. There are no evil characters like weeds or birds threatening the life of the seed. There's no scorching sun or storm. It's just a tale of new life growing.

It is...a *promise*.

Today, Jesus once again knows his audience. He knows *us* and *our* context. And maybe today Jesus is giving us a break. Giving us a promise, because he knows how much we need that right now.

Jesus doesn't need to add plot twists and conflicts and threats to our story this morning – we are all too familiar enough with those.

We have plenty to worry about. We know what's in the news and in our own lives – the things that break our hearts. The things that threaten to destroy us, or at the very least, knock the wind out of our sails. I could make a list – but you know your own context. You know what those things are in your life.

Think about it for a moment: If Jesus told a parable for your context...what images might he use? Mine could be, "the parable of the Working Mom," and it might involve sorting both emails and laundry.

Yours might be set in a hospital, a cubicle, a school, or commuter traffic. Or maybe fishing still works for you, just fine.

Like my 10 little paper cups, the variables are different for each of us, but the outcome is the same.

We were planted by God on this earth – and we are fragile and vulnerable – facing many dangers.

But Jesus promises growth. Jesus promises that what little we have will be blessed, and we will have new life – because that is what Jesus is all about. He came, after all, that we might have life, and have it abundantly.

Today, we are given this plain and simple good news, because sometimes that's all we really need, and Jesus knows that. So, today, receive this simple, powerful promise, and trust in the hope that it speaks into our world.

The seed is planted. The seed *will* grow.

But God shows us, I think especially through nature, how God intends creation to work. We see all around us that creation is always forming and re-forming and being made new. We see it in nests and blossoms and mold and moss. We see it in this congregation's baby boom. We see it in our gardens – where one day we plant seeds and then another day – miraculously -- radishes appear, and tomatoes and raspberries, and maybe kale ... if you're into that.

The point is that seeds are planted. And the plants grow.

This is the promise.

God's good purpose is for us grow and to bear fruit.

And that means that even if we feel small or inadequate or weak or somehow unable to succeed, that there is still hope and purpose for our lives.

Now I know that can be hard to believe when we're stuck in the dark, cold ground. That can be hard to believe when we can't see the pathway through the muck and into the light. That can be hard to believe when we are so worried about the potential dangers and conflicts and pain that we are afraid to make any move at all. Or when the problems in our world feel too big for us to make a difference.

Today, Jesus speaks directly to disciples who are so overwhelmed with the work and worry of this world, that they are losing sight of the promise.

So today we don't get a story about how to plant or where to plant or when to weed....we get a reminder that, actually, God is in charge here, and we are not. And friends, that is very good news today.

God will make all things new – in spite of the dangers and the evil and the threats – sometimes even, in spite of us.

And...we get to be a part of it.

You see, God's promise of growth does not mean that we don't have work to do. We don't get to sit on our hands and quit doing the work of the Kingdom. Seeds sprout for a purpose after all, and we too are given new life for a reason.

We hear what that reason is in today's texts.

Look at the image of the cedar tree in Ezekiel. The fragile little sapling is chosen, planted, and nurtured until it grows into a towering tree – at the top of a lofty mountain. Talk about abundant life!

And in the second parable we hear in Mark's Gospel today, an ordinary mustard seed becomes a thriving shrub – “greatest of all the shrubs,” he says!

Now pay attention to two critical words that show up in both of those stories. “So. That.”

The cedar tree, the mustard shrub – both of these unlikely characters are blessed and given all they need to live and thrive... so that...they can become shelter for the birds.

We too are given abundant life. We too are held in God's shelter and care. We are promised a new life and a fresh start every day through the gift of grace forgiveness. And that promise frees us every day -- from the power of death; from the power of sin; from the need to prove our worth or earn God's favor.

So that...

...we can share abundantly with others. So that we can provide shelter those who need refuge. So that we can feed those who are hungry. So that we can dole out the same grace and forgiveness and love that we have been given. SO that we can strive for justice and peace and wholeness for all.

Friends, we are called to live lives that reflect God's love, and yes, that requires something from us. So for today, let's take Jesus at his word, and trust that the promise of new life is for us. Find your mustard seed – that little thing you have that can grow and make a difference. Believe you have enough to do God's work.

You know, I think back to those 10 paper cups and I can see now that even though it was so simple...so basic -- like Jesus' story today -- there was actually something profound in it. All kinds of variables will be tossed our way, and each of us will face our own trials, but God's love and the promise of life cannot be overcome by any of them.

And, even more than that – we are provided with good nourishment along the way. God provides bread and wine that fills us with Christ's very life. God provides baptismal water that washes away our sin and makes us new every day.

Maybe just for today we should change our sending words. Maybe today we say, "Grow in peace and bear fruit that serve the Lord.

Thanks be to God. Amen.