

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time

The beginning and the end of our lives are pretty clear: We are born and we die. What happens in the middle is not so clear. Somehow we grow, but the reasons are hard to explain. Jesus' first parable today about the seed follows a similar pattern. The farmer scatters seed on the land. He goes to sleep and gets up the next day, and for many days after that. While he does nothing to help, the seed—for reasons that are hard to explain—grows through different stages: “first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.” This farmer does not know how the seed sprouts and grows; he just knows that it does, and without his intervention. He reenters the scene at the end, sickle in hand to harvest the ripe grain. He scatters seeds, and he reaps crops; we are born and we die. In the middle, growth happens, mysteriously.

Jesus applies this parable to the kingdom of God. He scatters seed through his word. At the judgment he will reap a harvest of souls. In the middle, though, because we have his word, and because people have shared their faith with us, we grow. It isn't always clear how. But we do.

This parable encourages. You could be someone who has a little faith, but you may feel it isn't very much. That may be OK; when Jesus describes the beginnings of faith, he doesn't compare it to an oak tree; he says it's like a seed. A little faith can still grow. Or you could be someone who planted the seed of your faith in someone else, but you cannot see the growth in them; some Catholic parents feel this way about their children. It does not mean that parents have failed; they did their job: they scattered the seed. Mysterious growth may still take place before the time of harvest.

Brother Guy Consolmagno, the Jesuit who directs the Vatican Observatory, recently wrote, “As a child, I was taught ‘the scientific method’—see a problem, devise a hypothesis, test it with experiment. But in my 50 years of science, I've never actually done that. Instead, we get some new tool, bang it on whatever is handy, and look through the resulting pile of data until we see a pattern. Then we look for a problem that maybe that pattern can resolve.” Brother Guy continues, “Non-believers seem to think that a life of faith starts with faith, but it's just the opposite. Every religious experience is, at first, an experience. Only after it happens do we try to figure out just what did happen—and if it happened to anyone else. Then, if we're lucky, we can find a theological category to file it under. But in the meanwhile, pondering the experience, like reflecting on our data, is where the fun lies.”

Jesus said one reason he taught in parables was so that people would not understand. At the end of today's passage, Mark says that Jesus spoke frequently in parables, but explained them only to his disciples and in private. Every day, then, is a living parable. Things happen to us that we cannot understand. The incomprehensible aspects of life may lead to the greatest growth. But at the time they just seem mysterious.

At times, all we can do is ponder the experience that life gives us. In that way, we can grow, though we may not know how, until God who planted us like seeds in soil comes back to take his harvest home.

Sunday, June 13, 2021