



# Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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Bloom Where You're Planted  
Mark 4:26-34; Ephesians 4:11-16

To have heard my Granddaddy Jones tell it, the red clay in Brunswick County, Virginia, is the hardest substance on earth, and trying to farm it for a living was a constant exercise in futility. "Those were some lean years," he would recall decades later. "Those are some poor (pronounced *pooooorrrr*) farmers up there."

Of course, as a boy, my dad would tell you that same red clay made a fine surface for playing basketball and learning to ride the homemade skateboards he and his friends crafted from old scraps of wood. Those were some *pooooorrr* farmers up there!

When my dad was about ten years old, Granddaddy finally gave up on tilling that red clay, and he moved to the booming metropolis of Roanoke Rapids, where, at the time, jobs in the cotton mills were plentiful. He made a good living in the mill, but he was a farmer at heart and longed to have his hands in the dirt, so several years later, he finally saved enough money to buy about 30 acres. Although parts of Halifax County have dense red clay, too, he found a plot with dark, rich soil, cleared about three acres, and built a little barn to house his old John Deere tractor.

For as long as his health would allow, Granddaddy would spend his summer days working what was, for him, a little piece of heaven, planting corn, collards, string beans, butter beans, squash, tomatoes, cucumbers, watermelons. I was certain he planted so many rows of bush beans because he enjoyed watching his grandchildren bake in the sun as we bent down to picked them, but, in fact, he knew my grandmother was an expert canner, "putting up" a freezer full of vegetables to share with neighbors and to enjoy throughout the winter.

But as much as I loved those vegetables, and, in truth, the mornings I spent with my grandparents working and playing in the dirt, my favorite part of going out to the farm with them was the giant sunflowers. I'll never forget sitting between my grandparents in the cab of the old pickup truck, driving down the narrow, wooded path, dodging the wild turkeys that ran across it,

and going through the gate into the clearing to see those mammoth sunflowers towering over us. As a little girl, I thought they must surely reach all the way to the sky. I don't recall ever harvesting the seeds, however. Granddaddy said he grew them as a gift for the birds, but I suspect Grandma's love of them had something to do with it. But what I remember most is marveling that those tiny little seeds could grow into plants 10 or 12 feet tall with heads close to two feet in diameter! Although I don't have occasion to visit the farm much anymore, it is a place that remains dear to me, and even as an adult, when I drive into the clearing, I think about those enormous sunflowers. They are a wonder which I still find spectacular and still have trouble comprehending!

Since sunflowers are believed to have originated in North America and were introduced to the rest of the world by 17th-century explorers, they would have been unfamiliar in Jesus' first-century Palestine. But Jesus, the master storyteller, possessed a rare gift for using examples of whatever common sights and sounds and items were around him, like mustard seeds and vineyards, to help his followers understand deeper spiritual realities. Farming and herding, mundane household items and familial relationships were most often the inspiration for his parables, and in his weaving of such stories, we catch a glimpses both of every day life in his time and place and of the truths of God's Kingdom.

Today's passage from Mark's Gospel is found very early in Jesus' ministry, soon after he emerges from the wilderness and calls the Twelve to follow him. He sets out teaching and healing throughout Galilee, and, we are told, he taught everything in parables, except to his most trusted followers, so that only those who were prepared to accept his message of discipleship and sacrifice would know his true purpose and identity. In contrast to the rigid proclamations of the religious leaders who often sought to entrap him, through simple images and profound interpretations, Jesus' parables offered messages of growth and renewal, of nurture and grace, of God's providence and acceptance and extravagant love and generosity.

Beginning next Sunday, Lakeside's children and youth will begin a year-long emphasis on learning how Jesus, through his parables, plants seeds of faith within us and invites us to bloom into beautiful and useful creations in God's garden.

Through the parables, we will learn that growth in the kingdom of God, indeed growth in our own lives, begins from the tiniest seeds—seeds of faith and obedience, seeds of openness and love and forgiveness, seeds of generosity and compassion toward one another—and how that growth often

happens in ways beyond our comprehension and sometimes in spite of us. But when that growth begins to happen within and around us, God's garden blooms with beauty and variety, with all manner of sizes, shapes and colors that are both useful and lovely in God's Kingdom.

Even though our theme of "Growing in God's Garden" will focus on our preschoolers and elementary children as they experience through Bible stories, activities, mission projects and music, and our youth will be encouraged to "Bloom" as they explore missional and vocational activities that help them to learn ways to put their gifts and talents to work in God's Kingdom, we invite you to grow and bloom along with us. In the passage we heard earlier, Paul reminded the Ephesian church that God grants all of us this growth so that we will continue to mature in unity and knowledge. These seeds of faith which we plant in our children, and which we continue to cultivate in our youth, must also be nurtured in each of us who call ourselves followers of Christ so that our faith leads to transformation, and we become new creations in the full likeness of Christ. We are all called to learn and serve, to worship and fellowship, to pray and discern so that we can fulfill God's purposes for our lives.

Although in this passage Paul lists apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers as those who are gifted by God, in other writings he also includes those who serve, encourage, lead, give and heal. He talks about those who demonstrate wisdom, mercy, generosity, and faith. I suspect if Paul were to make this list today he would include Sunday School teachers and nursery workers, choir members and committee members, ushers and those who volunteer for various missions and ministries, those who extend compassion to neighbors in Rocky Mount as well as those who travel to far away places sharing the love of Christ. His point is that all of us are called to nurture the seeds of faith which have been planted within us so that as our faith grows, we become more and more like Christ, loving God with our whole selves and loving our neighbors as ourselves, as Christ commanded us to do.

I want to be careful, though, that we don't paint a picture of growing into maturity that is all peaceful paths and sweet, fragrant gardens. I certainly don't want to make it sound as if we just attend worship and Bible study, say our prayers, and do good deeds, everything will come up roses. We all know that's not how life or faith works, and Jesus knew it, too. I suspect, in fact, that Jesus told so many parables about seeds and farming and growing because he knew all too well how difficult the life of faith could be. Growing things is hard work. Nurturing anything beautiful and useful from a tiny seed to a mature plant in full bloom takes consistent attention and care. Whether

we are tending a garden or tending a growing life of faith, the path is never easy and it is often unpredictable.

For a few years in my early childhood, we lived in a house with a big back yard and open field behind us, just outside of town. I suspect we moved there because of the growing zoo of animals we kept rescuing: dogs, cats, turtles, rabbits, even a fox which, for a short time, my father thought he could domesticate. In the very back corner of our yard was a small grove of apple trees. We enjoyed picking the apples as they ripened and sharing them with our neighbors.

One late-summer afternoon, probably much like today, my brother and I were out playing in the backyard when a storm cloud came up and my mother hurried us in from the sandbox. We had barely gotten into the house when a bright flash of light and a sonic boom of thunder filled the back yard, and we looked out just in time to see lightning strike between two of the apple trees, immediately toppling one of them and splitting the other one in half. Because of the time of year, those trees were laden with ripe apples, and I remember spending the rest of that day gathering up every laundry basket, shopping bag and gift box we could find and filling them with apples. My mother became determined not to waste a single one, so for days, she made homemade applesauce, stewed apples, and apple pies. She filled our freezer and those of everyone we knew with anything she could think to make out of apples.

We're all familiar with the saying, "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade." Well, I don't know if there's a corresponding adage for apples, but that's exactly that my mom did! We started to be like those people who make sourdough bread from the starters you have to feed: We took apples everywhere we went and forced them on so many people that they started to run the other way when they saw us coming!

Of course, we had planned to enjoy the fruit of those trees anyway, but we certainly hadn't expected to have to do so all at once, but when the unexpected happened, I watched my mother not waste any of that bounty but to make the best of it and to share it with others.

There is one important difference in our lives, however, one place where these parables and illustrations about seeds and growing and blooming break down: storms or pests or drought or weeds or even hard, red clay may destroy mustard seeds or apple trees, but as difficult as they may be, in God's infinite mercy, he has promised that such challenges will not destroy us. God has promised to abide with us through all that seeks to threaten us, and even

offers us the chance to grow in and *through* these circumstances. The promise of our faith, the hope we find in Christ, is that God never abandons us, no matter how menacing the storm, no matter how daunting the obstacle. Our resurrection faith, the faith we celebrate at this table and live out in the life which emerges from an empty tomb, is that the God whose creative voice crafted that first garden teeming with life and whose unfailing love renewed all of life in another garden on the first Easter morning, is the same God who dwells within us to renew us and to breathe new life into our weary and withered souls. The call of our life of faith is that we will grow and bloom if we allow ourselves to be re-created in the image of Christ so that we can be beautiful and useful in the service of God's Kingdom.

There is a folk song which says:

Some plant the seeds that others will water,  
But in all things, God gives the growth.  
Come let him garden the flowers within you.  
Come and discover some you've never known.  
Look at the love that lies deep within you,  
Let yourself be! Let yourself be!  
Look at the gifts you have been given.  
Let them go free! Let them go free!

But it is the chorus which is likely familiar to you, a simple yet beautiful reminder of our call to allow ourselves to grow, to flourish, to thrive in God's garden: "Bloom, bloom, bloom where you're planted. You will have your day. Bloom, bloom, bloom where you're planted. You will find your way."

Let us pray: Holy God, we thank you for the gifts of faith which inspire us and the many gifts you have placed within us. Let everything we do make evident your work within us. Take away our fear and remove any excuses from our hearts so that we may grow into the likeness of Christ and walk in the light and love we have been given through him. Teach us to love out of the great love we have been shown. Amen.

God of the universe and Lord of our hearts, you offer to us your mercy, wanting only that we offer ourselves to you in return. You surround us with your peace, seeking only that we open our hearts to you in worship and praise. You fill us with your love, asking only that we respond by extending love to others in your name. Transform our hearts that we might experience the breadth and length and height and depth of your love for us in these moments of worship and beyond.

Even as we marvel, Holy God, that you have accomplished more than we have dared to ask or imagine in our own lives, we recognize that your Spirit strengthens and empowers us that we might use these gracious gifts to carry out your work in the building of your Kingdom. Too many in our world live in the midst of violence, unrest and persecution. For these, O Lord, empower us to be messengers of your peace. Too many in our city suffer because of poverty, neglect or hopelessness. For these, O Lord, enable us to offer compassion. Too many of our own number struggle because of sickness or loneliness or worry. For these, O Lord, inspire us to extend hospitality and companionship that will bring healing and comfort. Too many of us live with fear or insecurity or doubt because of perplexing circumstances, strained relationships or uncertain futures. For each of us and all of us, O Lord, grant us grace enough for this day and hope for all our days to come.

Make of us a people of compassion and generosity and peace. Make of us a people who seek to know your word, to do your will, and to share your love. We pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Bread of Life, and by the power of your Holy Spirit, who has come into our hearts to dwell. Amen.