

Today's reading is a chunk. It covers a *lot* of territory, and I suspect that Mark put these stories together simply because they're all agricultural. They don't really all make the same point, and in fact, I'm not sure that some of them make any point at all. I listen to a great lectionary podcast, a discussion between a Christian and a Jew, both scholars *and* leaders of their respective congregations, and this week the rabbi suggested ultimately that everyone who listens to the podcast should be like Jesus, preach a sermon that nobody can understand, and then they can use the coffee hour to process their feelings about it.

I finally got my clue from the structure. Mark starts by emphasizing a strong insider/outsider dynamic. Insiders understand; outsiders don't. And apparently Jesus plans to keep it that way. That's the parable about the seed planted on different kinds of land, which, for what it's worth, is probably **Mark's** interpretation of a parable that Jesus told. Then Jesus talks about how nothing is hidden that won't be disclosed; then says that the kingdom of God is like a farmer planting seeds but not being the one who makes them grow. The kingdom of God is also like a tiny mustard seed that grows into a big shrub. And finally, Mark circles around to the insider/outsider dynamic again, telling us that Jesus explained everything in private to his disciples, but presumably the wider public was never let in on the hidden meanings of his teachings.

This is profoundly unappealing, and it also seems unfair and uncaring of Jesus not to try to reach everyone. But it's Mark's take on the career of Jesus, and he gets to tell the story his own way. As it happens, in Mark's gospel even the disciples don't understand most of the time. By the halfway point they're only beginning to guess that Jesus is the Messiah, but it makes no sense to them that the Messiah should suffer and die, and ultimately at the crucifixion the *only*

person who names him as the Son of God is the pagan centurion standing on duty. Not his disciples, not anybody who'd heard his teachings. So Mark seems to want to tell us that there are supposed to be insiders, but in fact even Jesus' disciples can't quite accomplish that.

On the other hand, Jesus never fires his disciples. He never throws anybody out for having failed to reach minimum benchmarks. He'll say something sharp, like "Get behind me, Satan!" but he doesn't say, "That's it, Peter, go back to Galilee, it was a mistake to call you." So it seems to me that as long as you keep following Jesus and holding open the questions—not trying to answer them just to have an answer—then maybe you're doing the thing he calls for at the beginning of Mark: turn around and trust the good news that the Kingdom of God is at hand.

Sara Miles is a good model of that kind of discipleship, where you follow even when you don't really get what's going on. She's the woman who wrote *Take This Bread*, about finding Jesus in communion and sort of fusing communion and food pantry at the Episcopal church she joined in San Francisco. In *City of God*, she continues her story, sort of doing her best to follow Jesus, being perplexed and clueless, and then *by* holding her confusion while following Jesus, gets little clues. (The other thing the rabbi said on this podcast that stuck with me was to remind us that "Israel" means "one who wrestles with God," so it's staying in the struggle, not winning it, that characterizes God's people.)

For instance, Sara worked hard to make her rag-tag neighborhood truly a community. She wanted it to be stable and for everyone to know everyone else, to be grounded in their neighborhood. But, she says, some neighbors actively annoyed her, the colicky baby born to a deaf teenager who squalled night and day, and

Geraldo, a skinny, falling-down drunk who lived a few doors down, [who] decided to embark on a wave of community beautification projects. “To give back,” he slurred. “I just wanna give back to the block.” Late at night he’d rip out handfuls of weeds from the wells around the street trees and scratch shallow furrows in the dry, hard-packed, dog-pee-enhanced dirt. Then he’d lay down some random plants—nobody wanted to know where he’d procured them—and pile gravel over the roots. Voilà: gardens. In the well in front of our house, Geraldo hadn’t been able to dig a hole deep enough for his droopy jade plant to stand up, so he’d tied it to the tree with some electrical wire. Then he’d stuck in three yellow onions, which he apparently hoped would turn into onion plants.

Geraldo would usually pause midway in his projects, leaving piles of dirt, stones, and plants strewn over the sidewalk as he tottered off. But he was immensely delighted with his vision—“*Vecina!*” he’d yell happily at me as I came out in the morning to survey the destruction. “Neighbor! Look, *que milagro*, it’s growing!” and indefatigable. Martha tried a few times, on the sly, to pull out his rotting onions and some of the rattier geraniums to neaten up the bed, but Geraldo would always be there another morning, on his knees, shaking his head sadly as he replanted the weeds among the garbage. “Somebody messed up your plants last night,” he’d say mournfully. “No respect. Don’t worry, don’t worry, I’ll fix it.”

Crazily, though, the jade plant was still alive. It had a certain janky charm, especially if I could stay on top of the trash in its branches. And after I’d constructed a border with some scrounged bricks, and Thad . . . had watered everything, the hodgepodge under the tree almost looked like a sidewalk garden.

Sara says that, like the lawyer who challenged Jesus about who his neighbor was, she often wished to weasel out of responsibility, hoping to calibrate who, precisely, was her neighbor and how much she was required to love which people. This to me is like the disciples; they know to follow Jesus but they **do not get** the inner logic, how it’s actually going to work. And like the disciples, she just stays in the game, however dumb she feels.

The greater narrative of the book is about how she goes out on behalf of her congregation to offer ashes to the people of the city on Ash Wednesday. They put ashes on the foreheads of heroin users, bike messengers, teenaged girls, back-of-the-grocery store workers. It’s not at all clear that everybody understands the whole back story of ashes and Ash Wednesday, but people accept the ashes, even come ask for them. In a previous year, some

clergy had criticized Sara's group for offering ashes without any context, without the invitation to name and repent of sins. But her companion in the liturgy said, "Priests assume—I assumed—'Oh, regular people don't have a full realization of the profundity of their mortality; people on the street don't get it.'" He sighed. "So you receive those ashes on your forehead and say you don't understand the ritual . . . but it's not about the ritual itself, it's about God's grace. And *nobody* comprehends God's grace. You just have to humble yourself to receive it."

So on they go, and finally an exhausted Sara comes home, only to find a note from her wife: "Honey, that little girl next door came by with her deaf mom, asking for ashes for them and Tia Linda. I told them you'd stop by when you got back from church. I'm at the gym. See you soon.' Busted, busted. At least I can do this last one in normal clothes, I thought. . . . But then I caught myself smiling. That crying baby next door, the one who'd kept us awake with her distress, had become a person who rang our doorbell boldly, who could translate her mother's signed request for ashes. I didn't really want Ash Wednesday to end. I wanted to see my neighbors."

If there is a secret to understand, a secret that Jesus is teaching, it's a secret whose truth emerges through practice, as we dumbly and uncomprehendingly do our clumsy best to follow Jesus. It's not something that can be explained. It's something you come to know by turning around and acting on the proclamation that the kingdom is at hand.

Gentle Spirit:
when we cannot see the way,
take us by the hand
so we can step forward,
in faith,
into the kingdom.
Fill us with hope,
so we can sing God's joy
all of our days.
Amen.