
Work Like It's Up to You; Pray Like It's Up to God

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
Proper 6 – Year B

Unedited transcript:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart, find favor in your sight, oh Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Did you ever wonder why Jesus doesn't use imageries from carpentry, when he's talking about the Kingdom of Heaven? We think Jesus was a carpenter, Joseph was a carpenter or maybe a stone mason. The ancient Greek word in the text suggests that, they were an artist man or craftsmen of some sort. I'm going to go with carpenter, because I love carpentry.

I had the privilege one summer, of working on a construction crew that spent all summer building this really large house. And about a month into the summer, all of our carpenters left. You see they were also shrimpers, and you can make more money shrimping than wielding a hammer. So when the shrimp started running, so did they. That left our crew somewhat understaffed. So the boss came one day, and he looked at me and he said, holding a carpenter's belt, "Do you know how to use this?" I said, "Absolutely."

And he gave it to me, and I fumbled with how to put it on. Then he said, "Do you know how to build a frame for that chimney?" I said, "Yes." And he left. And then the sole remaining carpenter, sidled up next to me and he said, "You have no idea what you're doing, do you?" I said, "No". And he quickly taught me how to build that form, and I quickly learned how to frame the house. And then we learned how to deck the decks and put on part of the roof.

Carpentry is about planning and precision. And even better, you know when you got it right, and you know when you got it wrong. Plumb is plumb or it isn't, a seam is tight or it isn't. Not a lot of ambiguity there. You just do it, you get it right, and you relish in the pleasure of it. I think if Jesus had used imageries of carpentry when he was talking about the Kingdom of Heaven, it all would have been a lot clearer. We would've had a nice manual on how to do it. Twelve easy steps to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

You would know just what to do, and you would know if you were there or not. Sadly that isn't what he did. We see this morning when we get to the fourth chapter of Mark, that instead of carpentry, he uses imagery from agriculture. Suddenly, in this long sermon where one parable spills into the next, it's all about seeds. We have the Parable of the Sower, of course, which takes up two thirds of the sermon.

And then we get the two parables of today, both about seeds. One seemingly about means, the sower scatters the seeds and then goes to bed at night, and they somehow grow without him knowing how or why. The other about ends, the smallest of seeds. The mustard seed is planted and grows into the largest of shrubs, whose branches provide shade for the birds that nest there. There's a movement here away from carpentry, and it's precision, and planning, and control.

Alison Gopnik, the pioneering psychologist and philosopher, makes a distinction between gardeners and carpenters in her book, *The Gardener and the Carpenter*, which talks about raising children. Raising children she says, "It's not like being a carpenter. There's not a schematic, you don't just follow a preordained plan. Instead it's more like being a gardener. You cultivate the ground, you water, you weed, and you wait, and you don't control the outcome." The beauty of it is, sometimes the most wonderful things are accidents.

A color pops up over here where you didn't mean it to be, and it's beautiful. A vine overruns the trellis over here where you had tried to prevent it, and it's perfect. And so it is with our children, their accidents often wind up being what's truest about them, somehow allowing their true selves to come forth. And she says, "A gardener creates a garden of complexity and diversity, where each part depends on the other, because it's got to adapt and change." That's its nature.

Seasons change, threads change, and so must the garden to be sustainable. Maybe Jesus was using these seed parables to tell us that. That the Kingdom of Heaven is like a garden, and God is like the gardener. I think that's fine as far as it goes, but I think there's more. Now, I have the privilege of owning a corner of my house. It's mine, my family calls it the chapel, which is to say it's George's. It's actually a glass in screen porch, if you will. The inside walls were clearly outside walls, and the floor is tiled. It's cool in the summer and downright cold in the winter.

But that's where I get to go and say my prayers in the morning. That's where I get to go and be, to look out these windows into my yard. There's this wonderful holly on the corner of the house, it has a squirrel's nest in it. And there're tall shrubs on a path on the side, that has a cardinal's nest in it. And there's a wren's nest and a tree on the other corner. The chipmunks have once again dug underneath the paved walkways. And sometimes in the spring, I like to let the yard grow. Because I don't really have grass, I just have weeds.

And when you cut them real close, nobody knows the difference. But in the spring, they flower and we get all of the pollinators there in the yard. And the sense that this is a whole living system, is so real. Before the sun comes up, the birds break into chorus as if to announce the day. And as the sun illuminates the yard, you get all of this movement. Chipmunks, and squirrels, and birds flying all around. I didn't actually know there were so many worms in our yard, but there're a lot there. And there's a neighborhood cat too, so it has some reality to it.

Yesterday a squirrel was literally hanging by his two legs upside down, eating one of the red cherries. I couldn't believe it. And sometimes I will look up from my prayers and I will just smile. Because you can't help, but feeling more alive as you watch all of this life. It's as if you were pulled into the flow of the life force, of the energy that is there. This I think, is what Jesus was talking about.

This moment of feeling as if you're in the flow of life, as if the very aliveness of the world around you is somehow connected to you and you are connected to it. That's why we get all of that difficult imagery in John. Of branches, and vines, and I'm in you, and you're in me. I think that's what God is. God is the transcendent, God is the gardener, the creator. But God is also eminent, God is also around us. And God is also intimate, God is also in us.

We call that the Trinity. Father, Son, Holy Spirit. It is as if God is not some isolated thing, but the very life of the world in which we live. Barbara Brown Taylor calls it the luminous web of life. So what difference does that make, you're asking? I think it's a big difference. Because I think instead of thinking of God as a carpenter, and we have to get it right, or God as a gardener whose attention we have to gain in order to get what we need, God instead is the aliveness of the world itself.

And to be fully alive, we need to enter the flow of that life. And to be aware of it, almost draws us into it naturally. Bringing out compassion and empathy, communion and connectedness. It almost brings us out, so that we see the people on the margins, or the least, or the lost, or the last. Not because we're trying to do a good thing, but because we notice they're there. We enter into service not because we're trying to rid ourselves off a social problem, because we want to be helpful.

It's not about where we're going as much as who we are. That's what it means to be in the flow of life. That's what it means, I think, to be in the Kingdom of Heaven. But it starts with realizing that God is not a distant power, not an enforcer, and really not even a comforter. God instead is the full flow of life. That's our faith. And to be drawn into it is to be brought into life.

To be drawn out of ourselves, to feel like we're part of the aliveness of the reality around us. That I think, is why Jesus isn't using imagery of carpentry, and he isn't even using imagery of gardening. He's using imagery of life, so that we will know that's how God is. So I want to leave you with an old preacher's psalm. Work as if it's all up to you, pray as if it's all up to God, and you'll be drawn into the flow of life and be more alive. Amen.