

Second Sunday after Pentecost (B/RCL)
June 18, 2006
Mark 4.26-35
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

In honor of Father's Day, this month's religion column in the Asbury Park Press is about the role of men in religion and in the church. The column **I** wrote was printed last Saturday and because I mentioned my dad in it, I immediately faxed it to him and my mom. After he read it he left me a voice mail, saying, "Nice column, but who's that guy you're talking about?"

I assumed my dad was talking about the Holy Cross brother I **also** mentioned in the article, and was shocked Dad wouldn't have remembered him, since he'd met him more than once and been entertained in his home. Later on when we spoke directly my dad asked the same question and I said, "Dad, you know who Brother John is!" He answered, "No, I mean the other guy you talked about." And I realized he was kidding that he didn't recognize **himself** in the glowing things I'd said about what a great father he is ☺.

Preparing to preach this Father's Day weekend sermon, I thought of my dad, and those of you who long to **be** dads and who **are** dads and who **have** dads, either here or in heaven. And today's Gospel from St. Mark made me think of the role of **patience** and **trust** in fatherhood....

If you'd ever drive in a car with my dad, you'd learn he is not the most patient man on the face of the earth. One of his small failures in fatherhood is the vocabulary he used and uses in the presence of his children and grandchildren when cut off on the road or stuck behind someone going 5 miles an hour in a 40 mile speed zone. He was **not**

patient when we got anything less than an A in school, when we had our various fender-benders, and when he detected the slightest disrespect on our parts toward anyone in authority. And yet – he loved us, wholeheartedly and actively parented us, doing double-duty to compensate for the absence of our mother after her death, and he commended us nightly into God’s care, kneeling beside his bed as he **still** does, hands folded and head bowed, subsequent to two hip replacements and a ninetieth birthday.

My dad, like so many others, does what he can to guide and support us, and gives the rest up to God. With varying amounts of patience, he waits to see what decisions we will make and what the outcome will be. He trusts that God loves us even more than he does, and that the Lord’s words spoken through Jeremiah are true and will be fulfilled: “I know the plans I have for you, hope and a future.”

The first parable in today’s Gospel is sometimes called the Parable of the Self-Growing Seed. Jesus says, “The earth produces *of itself*.” “*Of itself*” is the translation of the Greek word *automate*, as in “automatic.” The earth produces “automatically,” having received the seed the farmer planted, then mysteriously doing its thing, and transforming seed into a fruitful plant. We could take a course in botany and learn some of the ins and outs of the growth process, but isn’t it still a mysterious and wonderful thing, when seeds become green, growing things?

Biological fathers provide the seed and biological mothers provide the field in which it grows, but apart from the initial contribution, the growth and development of a child both before and after birth still belong to the realm of mystery and wonder. It’s so obvious to the father of a newborn who looks on in love, or to the father of a graduate who looks on in pride, or to the father of a bride who walks beside him down the aisle,

that who this child is and what this child has become is the result of far more than his efforts. This child is not **his** creation. This son or daughter is pure miracle, absolute gift, from the heavenly Father.

There are **other** parables, **other** sermons Jesus gave, that urge us to action. Through this one, though, Jesus urges us to **trust** in God's continual, often invisible, work-in-the-world, bringing about the kingdom. Trust that God will bring the seed to flower. Trust that God will winter over the bulbs in the garden. Trust that the tiny mustard seed will become a great shrub. Trust that God will shepherd our children when they are out of our eyeshot and out of our reach. Let the gift of hope bear the fruit of patience in our lives.

The seed is always symbolic of resurrection. Do you remember Jesus' words in St. John's Gospel?

Truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.
John 12.24

On Father's Day we are painfully aware of fathers we know and love who have had the unspeakably sad and difficult task of burying children. St. Paul's word of hope and reminder of God's faithfulness, using seed imagery, is this:

What is sown [buried] is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. 1 Corinthians 15.42b-44

The growth of a mustard seed or any other kind, the growth of a human being within the womb and then from infancy to adulthood, the transition from earthly to eternal life, are all mysteries. Do not doubt that God is at work within each one, though! Do not doubt that God uses what is small in this world to shame the mighty, and that God

brings forth an incredibly huge harvest from an infinitesimally small beginning. Work quietly and humbly to raise your children, to feed the hungry, to accompany the lonely, to give hope to the hopeless, fully *confident*, “full-of-faith,” that God is accomplishing more than you know, some days through you and some days despite you. And kneel beside your bed at night, physically if you can, and spiritually if you can’t, to thank your Father in heaven, to commend yourself and your children into His care, to rest peacefully in the eventual fulfillment of all His promises.