

The Theology of Agronomy
Reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 55:10-11
Reading from the Gospels: Mark 4:26-34

Throughout a significant majority of human history we were hunter-gatherers, living a nomadic lifestyle, moving with the seasons in order to follow the food supply. There is evidence of wild grains being collected for consumption over 105,000 years ago and given the possible inattention in your home to refrigerator management, you may have a hunk of cheese dating back to that time. Yet, it would be another 95,000 years before our forebears would begin pursuing the planned cultivation of crops, and from that point forward agronomy would constitute the central pursuit of the human experiment.

Some 11,000+ years ago, children began hiding peas under their dinner plates and the farming pioneers off the east coast of the Mediterranean began harvesting what would eventually become the hummus you pair with your favorite wine and crackers. Oh, and that tofu you mention in conversations when you want to sound hip and healthy? Asian farmers began harvesting soybeans, that king of crops in my hometown, some 7,700 years ago.

My hometown is the site of what was once the largest soybean processing plant in the world. Pasadena may have the Rose Parade but Mexico, MO has the Soybean Festival, and yes, there's a Soybean Queen. When the soybeans are processing at the plant there is a noticeable and distinctive odor that blankets the town. It's not necessarily offensive, just maybe a tad unpleasant at first. Yet, when you realize what that scent represents, life and sustenance for the town and its farmers, you realize it doesn't smell so bad after all.

However, even though my high school was home to more of those blue corduroy FFA jackets than letter jackets, I was a bona fide townie and had less than the foggiest notion of plant science and crop yields. Add to that, I am the product of the generation raised during those peak years for processed foods. Yes, I was suckled, fortified, and fed by chemicals you cannot pronounce. Cheese didn't come from a cow. It came from a *Kraft* packet of orange dust that you poured over macaroni, and strangely, looked like the orange juice dust that came not in a packet, but a jar labeled *Tang*. Dessert sometimes came in foil, but not because it just came out of the oven. No, the Ding Dongs and HoHos,

proud heirs of the Twinkie, were suspected to be devoid of any organic matter and produced not in a bakery but a laboratory.

And speaking of foil, do you remember having to be really careful not to burn your fingers when pulling back that foil on your tv dinner. Salisbury steak, what is it, anyway? 'Cause it sure isn't steak. I don't recall there ever being a Salisbury hunting season. And they say the impossible burger is an innovation. Processed foods. Can you imagine that day in the lab when some genius said, "You know, I always loved my grandmother's Easter ham. What if we were to liquify the meat and pour it into a square tube? We could even throw some olives in there and call it an *Olive loaf*." The only miracle here is that there was someone else in the lab who said, "You know, Hal, that's a great idea."

Needless to say, those of us in the processed foods generation have lived a few stages removed from the blessed miracle of hand to earth, seed to harvest. Truth is, the farther you are removed from the miracle of germination, the harder it is to comprehend the capital C of the Creator. The mechanization of the farm combined with the construction of the U.S. Highway system and the rise of the trucking industry made possible the jammed parking lot at *Trader Joe's* where we pick up all

the items for the magazine recipe without any thought as to the origin or location of the crops from which they came.

That mango in your chutney originated in between northwestern Myanmar, Bangladesh, and northeastern India. Seeds for mango trees were introduced to Africa by 9th Century Persian traders, and then brought by 16th Century Portuguese ships west to Brazil. From there, the little seed of the mango tree found its way to the Caribbean where a tall, majestic mango tree with its long, leafy limbs provided such shade that a school and a church were built around it in a little patch of Earth we call Bayonnais, Haiti.

From its seed, the mango tree can grow to a height of 130 ft, with its taproot descending twenty feet into the soil, and some specimens have been known to produce fruit for up to 300 years. Think about it. a small and parochial seed in southeast Asia eventually providing a base and shade for the organization of a school on the other side of the globe that now boasts over 2000 students.

Jesus said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when

sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

We are in the process of cutting down a number of overgrown hollies at our house, so we know that big things from small seeds can grow. Yet, in dragging those overgrown branches with their prickly leaves to the curb, we don't spend a lot of time contemplating the grand mystery that spurred such house-swallowing growth. The homebuilder just threw a number of seedlings out there and the next thing you know, birds were actually building nests in the security provided by those thorny leaves - sort of a gated community for birds. We'd rather curse the hassle of trimming the hollies than ponder the marvel of our Creator's art.

But the farmer understands what we cannot. The lines etched on their faces may signify season after season spent out in the sun, wind, heat, and cold, but those lines are also etched by the perpetual worry over a myriad of variables outside of the farmer's control. Long before *The Weather Channel's* Jim Cantore started pumping iron to fortify

himself out there in nature's fury, my father-in-law had a single station radio solely offering the latest update on the weather situation. He could purchase the latest tractor, disk harrow, seed drill, combine, fertilizer, and herbicide; and he could rise long before the sun came up and work until long after the sun went down, but there was nothing he could do to make the weather report say what it needed to say in order for his crops to mature and survive until harvest. Too much rain and you can't plant. Not enough rain and the crops wither. Too much heat and they fry in the field. Too cold and the fruit crop is lost. Combine dry heat and wind and you've got a drought, perhaps even a dust bowl.

My local farming oracle, Bill Ramsey, told me that even if you managed to have a bumper crop, there was always a bigger harvest of variables beyond your control. If everybody has a bumper crop, there's a surplus, so nobody gets the price to cover expenses. The cost to compete always left you on the thin ice covering Lake Bankruptcy.

You could handle one variable going awry but the onset of two or three would wipe you out. Bill related that in the mid-1980's the steep inflation of costs and interest rates brought family farms to the brink of collapse, and then a drought arrived. The older farmers in Bill's area

said that the droughts of '86 and '87 offered lower crop yields than the worst years of the 1930s Dust Bowl. We may fret over the bunnies eating our flowers at night, but unlike the farmer, we most often fail to conceptualize what a fragile miracle it is that we can walk through the produce aisle having the choice of whether to pair green beans or brussels sprouts with our Waygu ribeye.

Jesus said, "The earth produces of itself..." Jesus connects the attentive reader here to the mystery of Creation, using the language of Genesis 1 to hint at the passage of time and the work of God behind the scenes amidst the cycles of life. In Genesis 1, it says, "The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day."

In our text, look how Jesus phrases it. "The kingdom of God is as if "someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head." Do you see it? The Lord, the Creator continues to create, nurture, tend, and act through the passage of time. The farmers

understand that all their labors and all their knowledge of agronomy only take them so far. They know that at some point, they must stand back and behold the mystery.

Removed from the hands-on work of the farmer, it may be a challenge for us to perceive the dependence of the farmer on that which is so much larger than and so beyond the control of him-or-herself. Jesus is sharing this image with an audience closer to and more familiar with the grand mystery of agriculture. For them, and for us through patient interlocutors like my farming friend Bill Ramsey, Jesus is using the miracle of the seed to help us connect the proclamation of the word of the Lord with the nature of the kingdom of God. Unembellished, but with the same meaning, the Apostle Paul says, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth."

That's why Jesus could promise what to others only seemed impossible, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible." Too often, not only do we not trust that; we don't want that. If we can't control it, manipulate it, buy it, own it, or brag about it, we

won't pay it any attention. And yet God continues to germinate and nurture the seeds of grace in the subtlest of ways, in the most surprising places, and with the most phenomenal of results. Imagine someone, perhaps a Persian trader, traveling in what is now the Sagain region in northwestern Myanmar over a thousand years ago, pausing long enough to remove a few, approx., 2-inch mango seeds from their husks and putting them in a pocket or a small bag; and those seeds later board a ship with him traveling to the east coast of Mozambique. Eventually, those seeds or seeds from those seeds find their way to the west coast of Africa where a sailor on a Portuguese ship, smitten by the smooth sweet taste of the mango, drops a few seeds in a bag before boarding his ship destined for Brazil.

Well, after untold years, the heirs of those seeds somehow find their way to the northwestern mountainous region of Hispaniola where the climate allows those seeds to grow into these towering trees, offering enough cool shade to for heat-weary Haitians to survive the brutal tropical heat. And maybe, a century or so later, a young man named Actionnel is sitting in the precious shade of that mango tree. He is a person of faith, studying his Bible, troubled by the suffering and

hunger he sees around him in this poorest country of the western hemisphere, and he's wrestling with what his calling from God might be. Perhaps, he was reading this scripture or one of the many like it: "The kingdom of God is as if "someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how."

The young man ponders this shade of the mango tree and somehow it occurs to him, maybe this would be a good place to plant some seed. A church? A school? How about both? We could worship here. We could hold classes in this shade. There wasn't any money. Survival was about all anybody had the energy for. But the seed was planted anyway, and soon that seed was germinating in others, too.

Now, over 2000 students, the school not only providing solid education, but for many, the school provides the only food they eat each day. Times are tough right now in Haiti with the pandemic. Typically, you could say that if we get a sniffle, they get pneumonia. The government is not functioning. There is a rise violence and travel is treacherous. Hunger is everywhere. Yet, the work goes on beneath and around that mango tree and will continue with your support and their

courage. Seeds are planted, and even amidst the hopelessness and chaos all around them, seedlings will continue to sprout in the lives of the children who walk through the gates of that corner of God's kingdom called OFCB.

They believe that. Do you? Never underestimate the vitality of God's Spirit. Scatter the seeds there and wherever you are. Tend them, water them, nurture them, and watch the mystery of what God can do. Amen.