

Text: Mark 4:1-20  
Title: Of Soil, Seeds, and Hope  
Date: 4 July 2021  
For: Community CRC, Kitchener, ON  
By: Rev. Amanda C. Bakale

Paul Kingsnorth grew up in the UK in the 1980s. He's a successful novelist now who wins awards and book deals, but then he was just a bored teenager suffering through the local vicar's dusty, boring sermon at the weekly school chapel.<sup>1</sup>

On the way home from one of these school chapels, Paul and a few classmates stopped by the local parish church. A medieval stone building visible from most parts of the town. And they stopped, not to talk with the vicar, not to light a candle, or sit in the quiet cool silence, but to sign the guestbook.

Paul doesn't remember whose idea it was, but he was the one to pick up the pen and next to comments like "What a beautiful building" and "I feel a tremendous sense of peace when I am here", Paul scrawled,

I WILL DESTROY YOU AND ALL OF YOUR WORKS! VICTORY IS MINE! - SATAN

And because that was such great fun, they kept coming back whenever they needed a good chuckle and left more notes in the guestbook supposedly from the Father of Darkness. Until one day they showed up and someone, probably the vicar, had taken white-out to their entries and didn't keep a pen out any longer. Paul said they just shrugged it off and went to the video shop instead.

Paul wrote about being drawn to churches from his earliest days but he just couldn't buy the moralism and the seeming irrelevancy of religion for himself, for his classmates, or for his future. Paul outgrew his penned notes as Satan in the local parish church and grew into a devout atheist with little use for God, church, or anyone telling him what to do or what to believe.

**While ghost-writing as Satan in a church's guestbook is not quite common, Paul's story of dismissing faith in Jesus as irrelevant or not-needed or simply not true is not unique.**

Most of us know and love friends and family, children and siblings, for whom faith never quite took.

We might think of this as a modern malady or crisis new to our post-modern and post-Christendom culture, but that's not really true. The church has always wrestled with why some folks believe Jesus is who he says he is and changed their lives, while others just shrug and walk away.

Where we join the story in Mark, Jesus has just come off a few tense encounters with folks who definitely do not believe him.

The religious leaders were already plotting with the local government officials on how best to kill him.

Religious scholars were travelling from the big University of Jerusalem to test Jesus and determined that he was in fact possessed by Satan.

---

<sup>1</sup> Stories and quotes taken from Paul Kingsnorth, "The Cross and the Machine", *First Things*, June 2021. <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2021/06/the-cross-and-the-machine>

And even his own family - Mary and his brothers - came to quietly collect him and bring him home to stop him from embarrassing himself and them.

And here Jesus is surrounded by a crowd. A crowd so big he's gotta push out on a boat a little ways from shore just to not get crushed by them.

### **And Jesus tells a story of soil and seeds and growing things...**

Those who gathered to hear Jesus teach that day walked away from this parable, from his teaching, from his presence, and some quickly forgot what he said, they walked home thinking about their grocery list or what to make for supper that night.

Others really liked what Jesus had to say and got excited enough to tell a few friends and family about what they heard and why this guy might just be different...but when their family and friends pushed back, their fledging faith just couldn't take the skepticism and their faith withered.

Others considered following Jesus but then they looked at the lives of those closest to him...and well, they liked their house and career and their future was looking pretty good, so why would they give all that up to follow this guy...his words are good but not that good.

### **And then a few walked away from his teaching, his presence, with something taking root deep in their souls, a stirring of something true, of something profoundly good, and the seed began to grow.**

Afterward, when the disciples take Jesus aside and ask him to explain exactly what he meant, Jesus looks directly at them and asks:

Don't you understand this parable?

You can almost hear the exasperation in Jesus' voice as he parses out each part of the parable for them. This means that. And that means this. Ta-dah. Kinda like when you kill a joke by having to explain why it's funny.

But we shouldn't be so hard on the disciples, because they at least knew to ask when they didn't understand something. Us, on the other hand, can frequently just assume we know the answer. That we understand what this parable means. We wouldn't need Jesus to spell it out for us.

But this parable gets preached and taught in so many ways.

Some stress the condition of the soil. So the answer to why some believe in Jesus and others don't, is simple: It's all the soil. Tend the garden of your soul and make ready for the Word of God. The reason why some don't believe in Jesus is because they haven't prepared their hearts in the right way. It's on you. So do the work.

Others stress the erratic sowing of the sower - spreading seed all over the place. It doesn't matter if some doesn't take root, the seed that does is an abundant enough crop to make up for it. So, don't fuss about those who don't believe, there's plenty of us who do.

## So, how do we understand this parable?

Paul Kingsnorth admits that his teenage atheism amounted to not much more than arguing with Christians. He was reacting to the nominal faith of upbringing, so when he set out to find out what was true for him, he followed what he loved. Years of camping and hiking with his dad instilled in him a deep love and appreciation for the woods and streams and fields of England and Wales. Paul was guided by the strength and beauty he felt in the natural world around him. And for his 20s and 30s he followed that love into environmental activism. Marching. Writing. Chaining himself to things. Activism gave his life shape and meaning.

Until it didn't anymore. Around his 40th birthday, Paul needed something else to ground his life. So he began following Zen spiritual practices for the next few years and studying the teachings of the Buddha. But then that also didn't satisfy. Paul describes wanting something. Wanting worship. He said

My teenage atheist self would have been horrified. Something was happening to me, slowly, steadily, that I didn't understand but could clearly sense. I felt like I was being filed gently into a new shape.

And, nope, this is not where Paul becomes a Christian. This is where Paul becomes a Wiccan priest. And he joined a coven. Cloak and all. In the woods. Worshipping a nature goddess and a horned god.

And then Paul started having dreams. Paul dreamed of Jesus. Speaking to him. And then Paul started meeting Christians everywhere, which might not be novel for us, but for a Zen wiccan priest with a strong distaste for Christians, it was. Strangers emailed him out of the blue about faith. Christian priests contacted him for help with writing. Friends who he never knew were Christian before started talking about their faith.

Paul just wanted it all to stop. And it did. Just not in the way he ever could have imagined.

One evening, I was sitting in the kitchen of the house in which our coven had its temple. We were about to go in and conduct an important ritual. As we got up to leave, I felt violently ill. I was dizzy. I was sick, I was lightheaded. Everyone noticed and fussed over me as I sat down, my face pale. I had an overpowering feeling that I should not go into the temple. I felt I was being physically prevented from doing it. Someone had staged an intervention.

Dreams of Jesus speaking to him. Followers of Jesus showing up in his life. And the actual resistance of the Spirit keeping him from a coven temple and the worship of a dark god. Paul found himself becoming a Christian. Believing Jesus is who he says he is.

And eventually, this man, who had been a teenage atheist scribbling words in a church guestbook, an environmental activist and Zen buddhist, and a Wiccan priest dancing in the woods, was baptized in a freezing Irish river in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

How do we understand this parable?

**We fail to understand this parable when we restrict it to a one time thing.**

As if this parable only applies to those who aren't Christians yet. And they only get one chance to respond and they had better be ready for that one chance when that one seed drops.

We make the same mistake as the disciples, we're so focused on trying to figure out the riddle of the parable that we simply forget to look at the One telling the parable.

On a shore of a lake, with a crowd gathered around him, people plotting to kill him, his own family not believing him and his disciples not understanding, Jesus speaks. Teaching and teaching some more. Staying present with those who simply don't understand. Sowing words of hope and truth. Again and again and again.

In Paul's journey of faith, Jesus didn't give up when the seed didn't take in his teenage years. Instead he continued to speak to him again and again. Through friends and strangers, nature and dreams. Sowing seeds all over his life - in the rocky path of his atheism, in the shallow soil of his dabbling with religion, and then in the rich soil where the seed could take root and grow deep.

**This parable isn't a diagnostic tool for why some don't believe, it's a story pointing us to the One telling the parable.**

Who is the Word made flesh in an unbelieving world.

Who loves us when we do not understand.

And who continues to teach and to speak and to reach out to a world and a people who would sooner not listen.

**Jesus is the One who sows seeds of hope and encouragement and invitation all over our lives, in all kinds of soil, in all seasons of our life of faith.**

And the Word of God comes with the promises of God, as spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and do not return to it without watering the earth  
and making it bud and flourish,  
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,  
so is my word that goes out from my mouth:  
It will not return to me empty,  
but will accomplish what I desire  
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it  
(Isaiah 55: 10-11).

**Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.**