

Lectionary 11 Third Sunday after Pentecost Year B 2021
June 13, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I'm not a huge fan of the Lord of the Rings series; the story never quite spoke to me, and Tolkien's writing never really drew me in the way it did for so many others. However, living in a household that loves Tolkien and the Lord of the Rings, I know a bit more about it than I ever expected I would. And in preparing for worship this week, there is a poem from the Lord of the Rings that I found bouncing around in my head.

In The Fellowship of the Ring, Bilbo is preparing to leave his home in the Shire and journey to Rivendell. As he sets off on his journey in the cool night air, he sings. "The road goes ever on and on. Down from your door where it began. Now far ahead the road has gone. And I must follow, if I can. Pursuing it with eager feet. Until it joins some larger way. Where many paths and errands meet. And whither then, I cannot say."

I love this poem because there is a measure of uncertainty in the poem, despite Bilbo's eager feet. Because the future is uncertain, whether travelling is easy or hard. And we might imagine the same kind of uncertainty in the sower in our Gospel reading this morning. Seeds were precious, they had to be cultivated and preserved. Seeds represented the future livelihood of the sower. There had to be concerns about how much it would yield, or if that amount would be enough to live on through the winter. To the listeners in Jesus' time, the idea that seeds would be scattered but then not tended or worried over would have been jarring.

These kinds of uncertainties are not too far from our own reality. While some of us have started planting our gardens, sowing seeds and planting are probably not the primary concerns for many of us. Perhaps we're thinking of our post-COVID reality, what our jobs or school or retirement, or church will look like now that the world is opening up again. We know that we are going into our world to scatter seeds again. Some of us are uncertain if the pandemic is truly almost over, worrying over news about new strains and how close they are to home. And it's been so long, that it feels almost like just as we've finally adjusted to the pandemic normal, things are changing yet again, and we will need to adjust to a new, new normal.

All these new uncertainties join all our old ones, about work, school, family, health, and retirement. Because the future is always uncertain, even without big changes, new journeys, or pandemics starting and ending. We don't know what the future will hold. We tend to feel it most acutely when there are big changes on the horizon, but it's always there as we do our daily work. In fact, it feels like the most unbelievable thing about our parable this morning is that the sower is able to go out and sow the field, and then just sleep afterward. The sower sows the seeds, does what can be done for today, and then even in the uncertainty of what will happen to his seeds, he is able to rest. In the same way, we do what can be done for today, we sow our seeds, and then we live with uncertainty as we wait to see how things will turn out.

Tolkien acknowledges this uncertainty in a wonderful way. He doesn't title this poem, "The Journey Begins," or "New Roads," or some other signal that Bilbo's life is just beginning with new and exciting things to come. Instead, this poem is usually called, "The Road Goes Ever On and On," reminding us that our past, our present, and our uncertain future are all connected along the same road. Now sometimes, that road will take a big turn, or it will feel as though we've reached a dead end, but our entire life is a journey where our past lessons, experiences, and relationships are carried with us as we journey into an uncertain future. Our road into the future goes ever on and on.

Each of us faces transitions in our lives that are filled with the uncertainty of an unknown future. These can be big transitions like moving to a new place, getting married, changing jobs, or retiring. But small transitions can make us feel uncertain as well—meeting new people, taking up a new hobby, or volunteering in a new way. Our church, too, faces constant transition, in our ministries, in the people we see around us, and in our ways of relating to the larger community. Uncertainty is all around us, and is unavoidable.

The trouble is, as our road goes onward, we often face this uncertainty with fear and anxiety. What if things don't turn out well? What if we do all that we can for today, and tomorrow is worse? What if we follow this road before us with eager feet, and it leads us somewhere we don't want to be, or where we can't do anything good? It's questions like these that make me wonder how the sower in our parable could sleep at night. What if the seeds wither and die in the ground? What if they don't get enough water or sun? What if all that we do today comes to nothing tomorrow?

We usually understand these two parables to be about how faith grows and where it comes from, but the amazing thing about parables is that there isn't usually just one answer or interpretation. They are stories and lessons that can mean different things at different times. The wonder and mystery of the Bible is the way it speaks to new generations of believers with the same, ancient words.

That is what this first parable is about, at least that's one way to understand it. This parable is about faith, where it comes from and how it grows. How God inspires it in us from little seeds sown by the Spirit. But it is also about how our actions are worked by God into something more. It is a reassurance that even if we cannot see how our good deeds improve the world around us, in God's infinite power and mercy, and by God's mighty and caring hand, they still do. God is always using our hands to bring growth and life to the world around us.

This is the promise that we receive in today's Gospel. That our actions, the seeds we scatter, *will* bear fruit, even if we cannot see how, even if it seems uncertain, even if we do not understand. God promises that while our future might always be uncertain, our God isn't. Our God, who can take small seeds and turn them into mighty bushes, who can make the grain to sprout and bring it to harvest, is faithful and merciful, always working in us and through us for the good of this creation.

And so, allow me to paraphrase Tolkien's poem. He was a very faithful man, so I'm sure he wouldn't mind.

Our roads go ever on and on,
out from the font where all began.
Now far ahead our road has gone,
and we must follow if we can.
Walking new roads with joyous feet,
joining together as God's hands.
Where many gifts and talents seek
to build a future that God plans.

Thanks be to God. Amen.