

Choosing Toothpaste in Heaven

^{NRS} **Mark 4:26** He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground,²⁷ and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.²⁸ The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.²⁹ But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

The parable of the growing seeds. One of the shortest parables in the Bible- also one of the strangest. Hear it again, just so it's fresh: the kingdom of heaven is like a man who scatters seed on the ground and then goes to sleep. And then day after day, he rises and sleeps, rises and sleeps, just goes about his normal life, and somehow, mysteriously, the seeds develop and grow. And he doesn't know how- the earth, the earth just does it. And then, later, when they've grown up and are bursting with grain- it's time for the harvest and he goes looking for his sickle.

It's such a strange little story, isn't it? That man, for instance, it just struck me as I read it over and over again how little he does. I mean really. He scatters seeds, and then the first thing he does, the FIRST thing he does, is he goes to sleep. I mean he doesn't even put any fertilizer or water on them. And then day after day, he rises and sleeps. And all the while the seeds, the growth, it happens without him. It all happens, as Jesus says, because the earth produces of itself.

And all this, all this laziness, this wonderful, extravagant laziness- there's no other word for it, this is so strange. It's so not us. We are an industrious people. A motivated people. We are a hard working people- a decision making people. And we like to think our decisions, *our* decisions, are crucial and pretty much make all of the difference in how our lives go.

The other day I stopped in Fred Meyers. It had been a long day already. I was trying to just pick up a few things, then get the kids, then get home. Then carve out some time to eat and hang out for a bit, before coming back here for a night meeting. I just kind of wanted to get in and out- a hit and run mission, you know?

So, one of the things on my list was toothpaste. Melis and I were doing that thing where you've used up the tube so much you wind up having to apply like nuclear pressure just to eke a little bit out. And then you have to shake your fingers out. So, the toothpaste is in the back, I pick up the other things I'm looking for. I'm weaving in and out of cart traffic. I'm making great time.

And then I come to the toothpaste aisle- and it's like I hit a brick wall. I mean have you been to the toothpaste aisle lately? I'm not sure exactly when this happened, I'm sure it's been growing over time, but when I was a kid your basic choices with toothpaste was brand. You had your Crest and your Colgate and your Aquafresh, those were the ones I remember. Those were the big three. And we were Crest people. No matter how I begged my mom for the three-colored Aquafresh, we were Crest people. That's just how it was. I used to get so excited when I would spend the night over at someone else's house and they had Aquafresh. Those exotic red, green, and white colors all coming out at once. Oh it was incredible.

But that was then. We had just a few options- and they were enough. Not now, though. Now, it's like an explosion of possibilities and flavors and options. Right? I mean even the options have options. Take whitening- every single brand has about three different options- regular whitening, dual whitening (whatever that is), and my personal

favorite- peroxide with baking soda. This would be for people who enjoy baking while trying to heal cuts on their fingers. And then the flavors. You've got mint, extreme mint, and, my personal favorite, extreme mint blast! I mean is that something you even want happening in your mouth?

The choices- the choices are incredible, overwhelming even. And this is just for toothpaste. Don't even get me started on the feminine hygiene aisle- I mean talk about a stranger in a strange land when I'm over there.

But hey, even if we're overwhelmed by them- we are a people who like choices, we like options. We get nervous if we don't have choices- it makes us feel hemmed in, walled in. Choices make us feel free. Choices, dare I say it, choices even give us a sense of purpose- a sense of identity.

There's a great moment in the movie "You've Got Mail"...you know the one with Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan. (And yes I'm aware that self-respecting man would admit that he's seen You've Got Mail, much less admit that he owns it and kind of likes it...but hey, you like what you like.) Well, Tom Hank's character, his name is Joe Fox, he explains the allure of Starbucks, he explains the reason why all of us are willing to plunk down \$3.50 on a latte that maybe costs 50 cents to make. He says, and I think he's right- that it's all about making choices, and how we're really purchasing a sense of identity from making these choices.

He says, "The whole purpose of places like Starbucks is for people with no decision-making ability whatsoever to make six decisions just to buy one cup of coffee. Short, tall, light, dark, caf, decaf, low-fat, non-fat, etc. So people who don't know what

the [heck] they're doing or who on earth they are can, for only \$2.95, get not just a cup of coffee but an absolutely defining sense of self: Tall! Decaf! Cappuccino!"

Let me repeat that last bit again. "So people who don't know what the [heck] they're doing or who on earth they are can, for only \$2.95, get not just a cup of coffee but an absolutely defining sense of self." In other words by our choices, our decisions, the things we do- we like to feel this gives us our very selves, our very identities. Who are we? Well look at the choices we make. Look at what we buy. Look at what we do- that will tell you who we are.

But then there's this guy in the parable- and he's completely the opposite, isn't he? I mean wow- he hardly does a thing! He scatters a little bit of seed, and quite frankly gravity is the only really doing most of that work- and then he just goes about his business. The choices he makes, the decisions he makes- they don't factor into how the grain grows. How the grain grows- the earth produces it of itself. No help needed, thank you very much.

This is a parable we need to hear- a parable for people who feel so responsible for every little thing, as if our lives, our world, as if it's pretty much up to us. This a parable that challenges us a little. It challenges us to admit that even things we care the most deeply about, the things we spend the most time on- these things are not ultimately up to us.

You know Will and Ella- our kids. Melis and I haven't really changed much since we had Will and then Ella. I mean when we were parents for Will we are pretty much the same as we are for Ella- but they are so, so, so different, wonderfully different.

William was very cautious when he was her age, for instance. He would climb up something, then look over the edge, and think...no, I don't think so. Ella on the other hand...well you know the story there. Her first broken bone before the age of two- I know there was some talk of whether she'd even make it to three.

Melis and I care for them the same, love them the same; but they are just so different. And they're going to be different. And life is going to happen for them, and to them- and no matter how much we wish we could control things one way or the other- we won't be able to. This parable challenges us to step a little bit- especially when we start to feel like everything, everything is up to us.

And this parable also comforts us, too- especially when our best laid plans have started to crumble. Talk about a year where our best plans have crumbled before our very eyes. This is a year where we've seen good, hard working, responsible people, lose their jobs, lose their savings- all because things entirely out of control went haywire.

I heard a man from circuit city interviewed the other day. He had worked at circuit city almost all his life. He was a store manager when the company folded. And he talked about how hard he worked to make his store, and he spoke the store number like it was the name of his child, how he worked to make it the very best. And he was realizing, and it seemed that he was feeling the comfort of this, he was realizing that no matter how hard he worked, no matter if he would have worked day and night and weekends and holidays- the store's collapse...it was simply beyond his control. It wasn't his fault.

This parable tells us that you can be doing all the right things, you can scatter your seeds- and then if they grow, or they don't- this isn't really in your power. It's a

parable that warns us from trusting too much in our creed that says who we are, our worth, is entirely connected to what we do.

Maybe because I thought it was Father's day this week, but I was thinking about my grandfather, Ches Cashdollar. My grandfather was a mechanic. He was a mechanic who worked on trucks for the telephone company pretty much his whole life. He worked on ship engines in World War II unfortunately before folks were really using hearing protection. He was a smart man, an intelligent man, my grandfather, but he never went to college- he didn't have the opportunity. One of the interesting things about him, even though he valued education, prized it- paid for all of his children to go to school. He never seemed to regret his own life- never viewed himself as "just" a mechanic.

I think it's because his self-worth, his identity- it wasn't in what he did. His worth and identity came from how he did it. For Ches, and really for his generation- a person's importance didn't come from their title or their paycheck- it came from whether they were honest, whether they worked hard, whether you could trust their word. I don't think my grandfather would have even understood the question if you asked him was he happy being a mechanic. It's just what he did. He was happy because of how the seeds of his family had sprung up all around.

So, it's a strange story- one that's good for us to hear. Kind of a corrective for us. But you know, this isn't the only thing that makes it strange. Maybe the strangest thing about the story is that it isn't even about us, really. It's not. It's really about heaven- at least that's what Jesus says. Did you notice that? I mean we've just been talking about how we're kind of like the farmer- and how much happens in our lives that really are

kind of beyond us- good and not so good. And I think this is true. This is what pretty much all the commentators say this story is about. But Jesus says his funny little story- it's really about heaven- about what heaven is like. "The kingdom of heaven is like this- a man scattered some seeds on the ground..."

And as strange as it is to think that maybe not everything is up to us- this image of heaven is probably even more unusual. Heaven is like a lazy farmer and seeds growing up all around us whether we like it or not. See to Jesus- heaven is never about clouds and people with harps and robes and all that. It's never some place far away. None of that is ever in the Bible- people have made that up, the church has made all of that stuff up, and really, it's pretty awful. It's awful because our ideas about heaven are so boring, so lifeless, so clean, and so distant. And Jesus, when he talks about heaven, and he talks about heaven a lot- and his ideas are so much better. He tells us heaven is like a wedding party. It's like a wild and loud wedding party where the best wine is served first and never runs out. He says it's like a potluck, maybe even a church potluck, and, when the invited guests don't show up, they go out and pull in strangers from off the street. He says heaven is like a father whose boy has told him to go to hell, and runs off and screws up his life, and then when he comes back, before he can even make up a good lie- the father has already thrown his arms around him and called out for the party to begin.

And heaven, according to Jesus, heaven is like grain springing up all around us. And we don't even know how. Grain impossibility springing up from the earth, on the earth, all the while we eat, and we sleep, and we go about our lives, going to work, going to the grocery store, even when we're picking out the toothpaste from the 156 available

choices thinking we're somehow defining ourselves...when we're really just buying toothpaste. All this...all this is heaven. Right here.

And I know my grandfather knew about this. I know it. At the end of his life, my grandfather's very last words were to my grandmother. And he looked up at her, he looked into her face, into her gray eyes, and he said, "We had a good life, didn't we. We had a good life." And they did. And not only because they were both headed towards heaven- but because they got to taste it, to live it, when they were here. **Amen.**