

This particular soil (Mark 4:26-34)

Seeds do not grow without soil, and soil is a factor of place.

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Scratch the soil in central Kansas and bindweed springs up. It's been there all along, just biding its time, waiting for the hegemony of grass to be broken. Someone tried to tell me once that Mennonites brought this annoying, tangling, invincible weed as pig feed when they settled the prairie, but I have trouble imagining that even pigs would dig it.

In Jesus' two parables of seeds and earth in Mark 4, the kingdom of God is like a seed that grows mysteriously and well. The word of God entering into human hearts and history seems small potatoes, but—look at that!—it's alive.

Seeds do not grow without soil, and soil is a factor of place. Seed is scattered on "the ground." "The earth" (same word) "produces of itself." The mystery is not only the growth but the growth in this particular place.

God's presence and rule happen here, now. Jesus' life and love and communion come among us not in a nebulous, generalized, vast-as-the-sky way but in the grit and ground of this place on earth. The Lord of heaven kicked up the actual dust of Galilee. He's just kept right on doing that ever since, Galilee to the mustard-seed degree.

Which tells us to live in expectation of God near us. You never know when you'll scratch the soil and something unexpected will spring up and wrap its tangles around life in the very best way. The gospel still has that power.

The most wonderful parts of my ministry have come when I've been faithful in the small things—like when someone recently found his way into faith when I asked the simple question, "Have you ever thought about being baptized?" No one had ever asked him that.

And we live with hope for our place on earth. Nowhere is beyond God's unique and branching love, no dust impermeable to God's rooting presence. God made it all and wants it all and never gives up on any little square of his earth.

I spend a lot of time thinking about the rural church and trying to understand what makes it tick. I've talked to a lot of rural pastors. One thing I keep discovering is the importance of place in rural identity. It's not so much that rural economies are agriculturally based (they're mostly not) or that rural people somehow live closer to the land (we use disposable plates at our potlucks, too).

It's that many rural residents approach life with what sociologists Nicholas Jacobs and Daniel Shea describe as a "geographically based worldview." In a way that is distinctive from urban or suburban worldviews, we understand ourselves as a people in place.

The church, then, must imagine itself as being in and for this particular place, the *ecclesia universalis* but also the *ecclesia localis*—grounded here, for here, blessing and accompanying these people who are here. "The earth produces of itself," and we bear God's unique goodness in the middle of God's beloved somewhere.