

Arnhem-Nijmegen June 16th 2024 (Revd Dorienke de Vries)

Readings: 1 Sam 15,34-16.13; Psalm 20; 2 Cor 5.6-10,14-17; Mark 4.26-34

A friend of mine is reading a book that I cannot wait to get my hands on. Because it is titled 'When church stops working.'

When church stops working. I'm sure we all get the double meaning of those words.

When church stops working – meaning one: when the way we do church no longer seems to work. Fewer and fewer people seem to be interested in this way of serving God, in this way of building a faith community. Numbers are dwindling all over Europe – the number of people who regularly go to church and also the number of people who call themselves Christian. Our own numbers have gone down and we are not the only congregation struggling with decline. Whatever we do or try, the traditional, institutional church seems to have lost its appeal.

When church stops working – meaning two: when we all stop working our socks off in order to survive. The subtitle of the book is 'A future for your congregation beyond more money, programs and innovation.' Money, programs and innovation – isn't that the way we tend to respond to decline? We look for solutions which would make us more interesting. Activities and programs and new initiatives that may attract more people. We formulate targets, develop strategies and encourage each other to dream big. Of course to put all that into practice we need more money. More people. In short, we all need to give more and to work harder.

And it's not working. We become exhausted and frustrated. We fear for the future of our community.

Let us therefore spend some time with the first of Jesus' parables in the gospel reading of today. It is one of Jesus' agricultural parables – short stories inspired by the daily work of farmers, and what a relaxing story it is! Makes me want to be a farmer! You sow the seed. You go home. You go to bed, you rise again in the morning, you go to bed. No idea what the farmer does in between. Nothing, it seems. He just waits and occasionally looks out of the window to see what his fields look like.

And one day, look! Green shoots everywhere. At first it's more like a green haze covering the soil, but the next day he can clearly see individual sprouts. Within a week they stand 10 centimeters high, they have formed leaves, and still they continue to grow. The farmer may have to do something about weeds, or he may have to water the plants when there is not enough rain, but how the plants grow, he has no idea. The earth just springs to life, produces life of itself, feeds and nourishes it – and everything appears in its own sweet time: first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. All this while the farmer looks on in amazement. He remembers the tiny seeds he used, simple dry kernels of wheat that by now have died and disappeared completely. How is it possible, this abundance, this richness, this overflowing of life and energy which will provide food for his family for a whole year?

He is not just amazed. He is also watchful and alert. As soon as the grain is ripe, he doesn't want to lose another moment. He doesn't want the grain to rot away on the field, because he didn't pay attention to the weather forecast. As soon as it is possible, he gets his sickle out and starts to harvest the fruits of his labour.

The fruits of his labour? Certainly. After all, he is the one who sowed. But then who did the actual work? Or should I say: who worked the actual miracle, while the farmer was taking it easy and resting and waiting?

Now this is a parable of the kingdom of God. It is a parable that tells us something about the way we should 'do church'. About our attitude and our expectations. And it speaks very loudly into our worries and fears about numbers, about money, about all the resources that would give us some kind of reassurance if we had them.

Let me point out a few details.

First: The parable is not interested in the size of the field. In Jesus' days you would not find hundreds and hundreds of acres of wheat stretching out as far as the eye could see. It would have been a small field, enough to feed one family for one year. The miracle is not in the volume of the harvest, but in the wheat itself – in every single plant that reached its full maturity.

Our worries about numbers and size may come from a place of anxiety. A place where we fear there will not be enough for us. A place where we compare ourselves with others who seem to do so much better, who seem to have so much more to boast about – exciting youth work, special outreach programs,

two Alpha courses a year, etcetera. A place where our own ideas of what a church should look like are the norm. However, fear and jealousy may blind us to the abundance of what is being given to us. We may surrender to a spirit of doom and gloom, without noticing that our own small allotment is brimming with life. And so the gratitude for what is there may die, and with it the hope and the expectation that what God has given us will be enough to feed our family, and maybe even a few outsiders. The size of the field does not matter, but the quality of the grain does.

Secondly: The parable puts much emphasis on the very small contribution of the farmer. He sows the seed (by the way, even the seed he did not produce himself; even the seed is a given miracle, leftover from last year's harvest). So he sows the seed, and then takes it easy. He sleeps and rises and sleeps again. It makes us think of course of Psalm 127: It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; *for he gives his beloved sleep*. God gives us sleep and rest and times of relaxation, and we should do wise to accept those gifts, instead of running around in a frenzy as if everything depended on us.

It makes us think of St. Paul's words to the Corinthians: I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

It is so tempting to be in awe of big, impressive, noisy and busy.

What comes to mind at this point are the letters to the seven churches in the Book of Revelation. The highest praise goes to a church that is small, fragile and insignificant. Now if that doesn't ring a bell, I don't know what does.

Again: it is so tempting to be in awe of big, impressive, noisy and busy.

Samuel fell into that trap, when he was impressed by Jesse's seven strong sons. He had to be reminded that God looks on the heart. And so the chosen one was David, who had been completely overlooked and had not even been invited.

The people of Israel fell into that trap, when they were intimidated by the armies of their enemies. They had to learn to say in faith: others trust in chariots and horses, but we will trust in the name of YHWH our God. What matters is the presence of the Living One.

As a chaplaincy we find ourselves at the beginning of a new chapter. A new chaplain is now in post. New people have joined the council. We keep seeing new faces in church, week after week. Certainly, we can and should do a few

things to keep our community in good shape – and what that is has to be carefully considered – something we will do together in the year to come. But not from a place of fear, but rather from a place of trust in God’s abundance.

Let us be realistic, but refuse to panic. Let us pour our love and energy into this tiny garden of ours, this modest field, this small allotment. Let us talents and tongues employ, as we will sing in our final hymn. But if we have done what we can, let us then be patient. Let us rest in God – sleep and rise and sleep again. There will come a time when we shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves. We do not know how and when. We may not even see it in our lifetime. But the promise is there. The promise of joy. And the promise of sheaves.

Amen.