I remember the first time my childhood friend Colleen tapped the new girl on the shoulder in fifth grade. We didn’t know it yet, but the three of us would become inseparable until graduation day, marching in the band together, sleeping over at each other’s houses countless times, and creating entire collections of jokes and crudely-drawn comics which we titled The Books of Nonsense. We were sitting in desks in rows on the first day of school. Colleen and I were beside each other --an advantage of having a best friend near you in last name alphabetical order-- and the new girl was sitting in front of Colleen. Something intrigued us about the new girl. Colleen looked at me and I looked at Colleen. I was too nervous. So, Colleen went first. She tapped the new girl on the shoulder and whispered, “Hey, what’s your name?” The new girl whispered back, “Kristin.” And that was that. One little whispered seed of kindness blossomed quickly into a long-term friendship.
It’s easier to look back and see what small seed-like actions would grow up to a rich and meaningful harvest in our lives and in the lives of others.

It’s harder to look forward and to know what small seed-like actions will grow up to a rich and meaningful harvest in our lives and in the lives of others.

In today’s scripture Jesus taught, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.”

Farmers and gardeners know, we can till and fertilize the soil. We can water and in some cases even effect the light. What we can’t do is get down into that seed and make it grow. Even when explained by the DNA information inside, I still find the force that makes it grow to be a holy mystery.

When we plant seeds, be they zinnias, tomatoes, or carrots, or be they kindness, hospitality, and love, we have no way of knowing or guaranteeing the kind of fruit those seeds will bear.

Yet, this is what the kingdom of God is like, teaches Jesus, scattering seed and hoping, trusting, waiting for growth to come we know not how.

By the way, where exactly is the Kingdom of God? Can I get there on my bike or do I have to take plane? Are they still accepting my U.S. passport?
Jesus taught a lot about the Kingdom of God in the gospels.

From what I can tell,
it’s less a nation state and more a way of being in relationship
    with God and with creation.

It seems like a place we can maybe experience as individuals
    but probably will best experience in community
    when we do our best to live in biblical right relationship together.

Martin Luther King, Jr. talked about an idea called the Beloved Community,
    which he believed we could co-create together and with God.

As a Black man in America,
he had no illusions that we already lived in a world
    that was just as God wanted it to be.

Rather, he called upon all people to imagine a new world coming,
    and in one famous sermon quoted Romans 12
    as inspiration for a world in which all people lived together
    with justice, love, and peace.
    He quoted Romans 12: 2
    “Be ye not conformed to this world,
    but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

That use of Romans and that understanding of holy corporate relationships to me stands in stark
contrast to the use of Romans 13
    heard in the news this week from Attorney General Jeff Sessions.

Using the same verses from Romans 13
    used historically by authoritarian political regimes,
Sessions used the verse
“let every person be subject to government authorities”
to justify separating children from their parents at the border
and keeping them in internment camp-like conditions.

I love the Bible, I believe it can be used to free us from the chains
of suffering, sin, and brokenness that keep us from experiencing
the full grace and love of God.

I love the Bible, but I also believe it can easily be misused as a weapon
in the hands of coercive power.
And I believe we can tell it is being misused as a weapon
when we see it causing actual physical violence and trauma
like we see in the case of the separation of immigrant families.

I believe we can tell it is being misused as a weapon
when we see it thoroughly divorced from the passage just before it
in Romans 12 which gives a picture of that Beloved Community
and teaches “contribute to the needs of the saints;
extend hospitality to strangers.”

I know some of us here read the Bible more like our Attorney General.
And I want you to know how much I love you
even if I disagree with you.
In fact, I love you too much to let you be comfortable on a Sunday morning.

And I want you to feel invited to our Wednesday morning Bible study
where we bring our questions and share our collective wisdom each week
and where we very often do not agree.

Here I get to say my piece.
There, ask the regulars who come, I get to ask questions.
I think when we read the Bible in conversation
with the current events of our country and our individual lives
we come up with great questions.

Jesus taught with questions too. And through story.

Jesus asked,
“With what can we compare the kingdom of God,
or what parable will we use for it?
31 It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground,
is the smallest of all the seeds on earth;
32 yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches,
so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

A church is not necessarily the kingdom of God or the Beloved Community
but I believe it can be a place
where we find the seeds of the kingdom of God taking root to grow.

The seeds can be small—barely perceptible in some cases.
Like a full plate of food given to someone with an empty stomach.
Or a warm hug shared with a suffering heart.
Or a question asked about a troubling scripture.
Or a prayer sent forth for a relationship’s mending.
Or a stranger welcomed with extravagant hospitality.
Or a hand held while making an important phone call.

French philosopher, mystic, and activist Simone Weil famously said:
“Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.”
Giving attention, care, or shelter can seem like an insignificant gift
to those who give it.
But for those who receive it when they most need it
nothing could be more transformative.

These are the gifts given by nurturing parents.
I thank God for those of us lucky enough to have them or to be them.
But these gifts can also be given by a chosen family of faith
doing their best to live up to their calling.

A church is not a building, but a church can provide shelter.
It can provide social, emotional, spiritual, and physical shelter.

A church is not a building,
but a building can provide shelter
for the ministries of the church and the ministries of the community
of which it is a part.

A church is not the government,
but when the government will not provide shelter to the most vulnerable
it can be a place where the kingdom of God becomes abundantly real
to those who need an advocate
and to those who need a place to find their rest.

It was this church who used it’s property to house
refugees from El Salvador some decades ago.

It is this church who feeds hungry people every Saturday night.

It is this church who welcomes all to worship and community
regardless of who we are, who we love, how much money we make,
what team we root for in the World Cup,
or how we interpret the Bible.
It is not always easy or pretty.

I like that Jesus uses a mustard shrub
instead of a mighty glorious oak tree to describe the kingdom of God.
It doesn’t have to be glorious or perfect to give rest to the birds of the air.

I like that the birds freely come to the outstretched branches
like the droves of homeless people who arrive in Elgin
to receive the famed care of our soup kettles,
shelters, and compassionate police department.

Elgin is messy too and imperfect.

But I would like it if my country behaved more like my city
and reached out its hands and opened its heart
to these desperate immigrants and refugees at our border.

Sometimes big problems like these leave me feeling helpless
to do anything effective with my small amount influence and power.

Then I read passages like this one,

and I am reminded that I don’t have to do it all—at least not by myself.

Jesus taught,

“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.””

Those of you who are parents may remember
that babies don’t smile for weeks.
They don’t have the ability to do it.
Sure, sometimes they curl up their lips
when they pass gas or something
but a true smile is a long time in the making.

I remember investing and investing before that first smile.
    I remember changing countless diapers,
giving round the clock feedings, cooing sweet words,
singing hours of dear lullabies,
and settling into endless snuggles.

    I didn’t know yet what amazing little beings
my children would become who would
eventually walk, talk, feed themselves
    and crawl into my bed at night to whisper “I love you.”

I guess I knew that behind those pale grey eyes
    and helpless floppy limbs a lot of growth was happening
but I didn’t think much about it moment to moment.

    All I knew then was that I was exhausted
and while I didn’t want to be a good parent
just to receive affirmation from my child
    --probably a dangerous reason to be a parent!
I was ready for just one little sign
    that all my effort was appreciated.

In the foggy haze of those first sleepless days,
    I remember that first smile came in the middle of the night,
changing a diaper on the sink counter
where he just fit so perfectly.
It made my whole life and was worth
every single countless seed of effort Parker and I put in.
It was one of the greatest harvests I’ve ever seen.

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Sometimes our relationships are not what we want them to be,
and it will take a long time and countless seeds of kindness
which we can only trust God will use to sprout and bloom
in order for them to heal.

Sometimes our communities and our country do not live up
to our dreams for the glory it could be
and it will take a long time and countless seeds
of courageous compassion
which we can only trust God will use to sprout and bloom
in order to make true peace.

Sometimes we are called to do terribly new, scary, or risky things
and it will take a long time and countless seeds of awkward action
which we can only trust God will use to sprout and bloom.

I believe we are called to risk planting those seeds,
and that when we do God will take our vulnerable investments
of nurture and care and even if we do not know how
God will grow them into a beautiful harvest of beloved community
in which we are all loved, known, and made free
in God’s unending, unstoppable justice, love, and peace.

May it be so. Amen.