We need the growth of God’s kingdom now, more than ever, because in the past 25 years, some 40 million Americans, or about 12% of the population, stopped going to church. According to writerIsabel Fattal, “Contemporary America simply isn’t set up to promote mutuality, care, or common life. Rather, it is designed to maximize individual accomplishment as defined by professional and financial success.” The cultural narrative is one of individual accomplishment defined by professional and financial success. Get a good education, work long hours and you can do it on your own. Many people find their identity more in individual accomplishment than in community participation.

Writer Derek Thompson coined the term *workism* to describe how work has morphed into “a kind of religion, promising identity, transcendence, and community.” People believe that work will give them a sense of identity, provide a purpose and meaning in life, and offer a deep sense of connection with other people. But *workism* does not and cannot deliver on these promises because with *workism* there is only flawed human effort. What is needed is the automatic growth provided by God. *Workism* looks down on things that are small and unimpressive, like a mustard seed, the very things God uses to craft a kingdom. *Workism* cannot provide a safe and hospitable environment, one in which people may nest in safety and security, because it seeks self-fulfillment rather than the common good.

What we need is a new story: the parable of the blooming church. This is a story of how the Christian community might better serve its members and its neighbors. This parable helps gain a new understanding of Christian identity, of transcendence, and of community, things which truly reveal the kingdom of God.

The story begins with *Christian* *identity*. In a blooming church, people see themselves as followers of Jesus, not as workers in a global economy. They consider themselves disciples of Jesus, trying to love as Jesus loved and serve as Jesus served. They see themselves and others as precious children of God, valuable for who they are, not for what they produce. In a blooming church, members identify themselves as being made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26).

Then, there is *transcendence*. A blooming church provides occasions for transcendence in worship, Bible studies, and activities that nurture spiritual growth. This means people can stretch beyond normal human experience and gain a sense of God’s presence and power in their lives. “A vibrant, life-giving church,” writes Jake Meador, “asks people to prioritize one another over career, to prioritize prayer and time reading Scripture over accomplishment.” With these things, we can reach beyond everyday *workism* and grow closer to God. We discover that God’s kingdom really does grow automatically, if we let it.

Finally, the parable includes *community*. The tragedy of contemporary American life is that it does not support care, mutuality, or common life. Isolation is on the rise in our country, and loneliness is a big problem; but churches can combat isolation and build strong bonds of fellowship. Faith-based groups can be a source for regular social contact, can provide support, meaning, and purpose, and can foster a sense of belonging around shared values and beliefs.

In blooming churches, congregations focus on providing people with safe and welcoming spaces. Like the mustard shrub that provides branches and shade for building nests, churches offer people a place of security and comfort. Churches can be “better, truer sorts of communities, ones in which the hungry are fed, the weak are lifted up, and the proud are cast down” (Meador). Like the Amish in the novel, *When the English Fall*, we are challenged to respond as Christians to the needs of the world around us. The interdependency of identity, transcendence, and community are critical to a blooming church. Each element needs the other two elements to grow and thrive.

During a long and brutal winter, three sisters visited a community where food was scarce, the people starving. Despite this famine, the three sisters received a warm greeting and food in abundance. In gratitude for this hospitality, the three sisters gifted the people with three seeds – corn, bean, and squash – a small package that ensured the people would never go hungry again. Robin Wall Kimmerer shares this story in *Braiding Sweetgrass* and reflects on its spiritual and biological significance. These three seeds naturally complement each other to produce an abundance of food.

Kimmerer writes: “The lessons of reciprocity are written clearly in a Three Sisters Garden. Together their stems inscribe what looks to me like a blueprint for the world, a map of balance and harmony. The corn stands eight feet tall; rippling green ribbons of leaf curl away from the stem in every direction to catch the sun…The bean twines around the corn stalk, weaving itself between the leaves of corn, never interfering with their work…Spread around the feet of the corn and beans is a carpet of big broad squash leaves that intercept the light that falls among the pillars of corn…The organic symmetry of forms belongs together; the placement of every leaf, the harmony of shapes speak their message. Respect one another, support one another, bring your gift to the world and receive the gifts of others, and there will be enough for all.”

Jesus’ seed parables remind us that we are partners with God in creation. When we respect relationships and support one another, God’s kingdom is revealed as a place of plenty; a place where all God’s creatures can bloom and grow and flourish. But when we neglect these relationships and God’s blueprint of balance, all creation suffers. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote of this suffering in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* when he said: “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Our interdependence is a universal truth. God patterns our lives with this reciprocity, this mutuality, in mind. Yet, we are stubborn and oppose God’s ordering. We compete for resources and hoard what we have. We double down on our certainties and fail to investigate the wisdom of others. We divide ourselves into Us and Them. We denigrate the natural world, making it a submissive subject rather than an equitable partner. But the seeds we sow determine our future reality. If we sow seeds of division, of subjugation, of opposition, we will harvest poverty, hatred, and violence. If we sow seeds of justice, equity, and peace, we will harvest a world where all can bloom.

Jesus’ parables to help to us recognize the truth of who we are and who we might become with God’s help. That truth is revealed in the parable of a tenacious seed, scattered by a gardener, which grows to offer abundance. This process is a mystery to the gardener, but not to Jesus, who teaches us that walking in the path of love, respect, and harmony leads to a world where no one goes unfed.

The parable of the blooming church helps us see our place in God’s kingdom. Each of us can provide much needed identity, transcendence, and community, for ourselves and others. We do not have to be in a megachurch; remember the small mustard seed grows to be the greatest of all shrubs. We do not have to do it all on our own; remember that the seed of the kingdom grows automatically, through the power of God. The challenge for us is to put our trust in the work of God’s kingdom, not in the *workism* of the world. The parable of the blooming church is a story that we can bring to life providing identity, transcendence, and community if we let the seed of God’s kingdom grow among us.

Prayer: Cultivating God, far too often I rely on my own understanding and only view Your Word as a good but superficial book. Forgive me, Lord. I desire to gaze deeply into Your Word, drinking in all the truths and precious promises within. Guide me in Your truth and teach me how to serve by nurturing identity, transcendence, and community. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

**Sources:**

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**The Parable of the Blooming Church**

Sunday, June 16, 2024 [Mark 4:26-34](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+4%3a26-34&language=en&version=NRSVUE)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

The story begins with a massive solar storm, causing the collapse of modern civilization. Computers stop working, phones go dead, machinery grinds to a halt, airplanes fall from the sky. The only people with the resources to survive are the Amish, who do not rely on technology. This frightening narrative is the thread of David Williams’ novel, *When the English Fall.* “English” is what the Amish call the non-Amish; they suffer when their technology fails.

The English become desperate and go after the food and supplies stored up by the Amish. Facing the threat of invasion, the non-violent Amish must decide how to respond as Christians. They wonder how much they are obligated to share their resources. They wrestle with when violence becomes an appropriate response to aggression. Questions like these help us discover how we should respond as followers of Christ. This novel is a parable, a story that holds up a mirror for us, helping us to see ourselves in a new way. Parables invite us to wonder about the nature of God’s kingdom and our part in its fulfillment.

In the parable of the growing seed, Jesus says, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain — first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head.” (Mark 4:26-28). Here we see the growth of the kingdom as something which is automatic. When Jesus says, “The earth produces of itself,” (v. 28), it is an invitation for us to scatter seeds, go to sleep, and rise again to witness God’s kingdom sprouting and growing. We do not know how the growth happens, except that Jesus says it happens inevitably.

Then Jesus says, the kingdom of God “like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade” (vv. 31-32). God’s kingdom begins small, but it “becomes the largest of all garden plants” and puts forth “big branches” which become places of safety and hospitality, where “the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

These parables help us see God’s kingdom in a new way. They teach us, first, that the emergence of God’s kingdom is automatic if we plant the right seeds and leave the growth to God. Second, they remind us that the seed of the kingdom may be small and unimpressive at first, but it grows into something big and beautiful which can be a much-needed place of safety and hospitality.