

Sermon (7/17/18, Mark 4: 26-33):

I learned how to gamble in Middle School. Okay, I know that sounds a little weird and not a confession you'd expect to hear from a pulpit, but I really did. At least, I learned how to play the roulette wheel.

It was part of a math class I was in where our teacher came up with this creative way of teaching us statistics and probability. Of course, there was no money involved, but our teacher split us into groups, gave each group a roulette wheel, taught us the rules, and we were off and running. The clacking sound of roulette balls bouncing their way across spinning wheels soon filled the room.

Looking back, I guess it would have looked pretty strange if a visitor had stopped by. Seeing a classroom of Middle Schoolers playing roulette is not exactly something that would be high on a person's list of probabilities.

We didn't know the difference, though. For us, it was fun. A board game that we actually had permission to play during class! As we played, we filled in our probability charts, calculating how many times the ball landed on red or black, odd or even numbers, 7s, 8s, and other numbers. After we were done, each of our groups tallied up our results and combined them with the other groups. We listed them on the board. We made calculations to determine how likely it was for the ball to land on a certain color and a certain number.

We had so much fun doing this that, for Christmas that year, I asked my parents for a roulette game. I didn't think anything of it which made my parents' stunned look all the more surprising. I guess, a request for a Roulette wheel isn't exactly what a parent expects to hear from their young teen. I explained to them the reason behind my request. They seemed to understand and, lo and behold, I got a roulette wheel for Christmas!

Of course, one of the things we learned in that class was that statistical probabilities cannot predict a certain outcome with absolute certainty. They are designed to predict likelihood rather than certainty. In the end, that's about the best we can do.

Calculating probabilities is, I guess, one way we attempt to

understand what is going on in the world. In the grand scheme of things, there is so much that seems beyond our ability to forecast which can make life feel pretty darn scary, especially at points where weighty and impactful decisions need to be made. What should we choose? What decision should we make? In what vocation should we invest our lives? Is this the person I should marry? Should we consider starting a family? Can we afford a family? Is it time to buy a house? Is it time to retire? Can we afford to retire? Is it time to move into some type of Senior housing? Such weighty decisions that will have a lasting impact! Wouldn't it be nice if God would tear open the heavens and show us, in clear and unambiguous terms, which decision is best for our future? Wouldn't it be nice to know how the world is designed to operate and what our part is supposed to be in it? Wouldn't it be nice to move forward with certitude rather than the nervous fear that accompanies uncertainty? Sometimes, no matter how many calculations we make, settling upon a decision can feel quite unsettling.

While it's not possible for us to know with absolute certainty the mysterious thoughts and plans of God, the Bible is filled with subtle and not so subtle hints of how God works in the world. And much of it tends to be far distant from our normal way of thinking.

'The kingdom of God is like someone who scatters seed on the ground...' That's it, the parable says. The ground does the rest – the earth, the sky, the clouds, the dirt all contribute to the seeds growth while the farmer does little else other than 'sleep and rise night and day'.

It's not exactly a winning image for us go getters. We're used to thinking that success and achievement is completely dependent upon our efforts to make it happen.

We're used to working hard to make offices run well, to turn patches of ground into gardens, to maintain a lawn that looks green and healthy, to get good grades, to get good performance reviews, to staying trim and fit, to maintaining a home, to keeping things neat and orderly. Those things just don't happen on their own. They take an investment of time, energy, and commitment. We make a choice and then we run with it.

All true but it seems that this thinking is not something that can be

easily extended to our understanding of how God builds his kingdom. It's about our slinging seed hither and yon and then sleeping and rising and waiting and watching. How those tiny little seeds transition from nothing to something, from dormancy to life, from hard specks to tender green shoots is all a mystery that only God completely understands. We can do all the mathematical calculations we want to predict the likelihood of growth, to estimate where and when and how growth will best succeed but in the end our best hope is learning how to simply be good and faithful seed slingers, trusting that God will do the rest.

It's a tough lesson, a tough parable to come to grips with in this present reality in which we live where things sometimes feel so precarious, including in the church. Not enough money to meet budgets. Not enough people to fill pews. Volunteer pools that keep shrinking. Things that churches used to do but can't do any longer because they're just isn't enough – enough people, enough time, enough talent, enough funds.

It's easy for panic to get the best of us. It happens to me all the time. What can we, should we be doing to make a difference? What creative new thing should I be trying to bolster the ranks and hopefully the coffers? Maybe a little of that probability mathematics would help. Maybe it would tilt the odds in our favor.

Sometimes, panic gets the best of me. It's hard to sleep at night. It's hard to relax...to do a little of that sleeping and rising the seed slinger in this parable does. So much, it seems, depends on our choosing and doing and creating. So much depends on me. Won't you tear open the heavens, O Lord, and make known to us, in clear and unambiguous terms, what we need to do? It's difficult to rest.

But then things like what has happen in the past few weeks come along and it's a real eye opener. Eight new and wonderful people met with the Board of Elders wanting (yes, wanting!) to become members of our church. Last week we baptized two children. Three other baptisms are in process. And, today, we have the joy of welcoming two amazing young people, Joseph and Maddie, to our church as they confirm their baptismal vows. It's all been quite an amazing ride and it kind of feels

like it came out of the blue...it just sprung up from the ground overnight.

I'd like to think it's all because of our hard-work, our amazing skills at gardening. It's something we've accomplished - Christian education classes, Pastor Classes, great worship, great music, enriching study groups, visits from St. Nicholas, our Children and Worship program, the generous sharing of gifts and talents from people in our congregation, picnics, strawberry festivals, a thriving Daycare and on and on. I'd like to think that the reason Joseph and Maddie have grown into the amazing young people they are is a result of our efforts, their parents' efforts, our church's efforts; our combined gifted ability to raise children of faith. And, of course, we mustn't forget my unbelievably amazing, wonderfully incredible skills at being a good Confirmation teacher not to mention my great gift of modesty. I'd like to think that, and it is true that we have all played a significant role in their growth but, to be honest, it's all just been good seed slinging. That's what we've done. We've tossed lots of seeds upon the fertile ground of their hearts hoping it would take root. And, amazingly, somewhere between our sleeping and rising, somewhere between the day of their baptisms to now, God has done something amazing. God has taken those seeds and made them grow. God has transformed those tiny, hard shelled specks, lovingly flung from our hands, into wondrous gifts of new life.

Today we welcome and celebrate this moment in Joseph and Maddie's lives because it is obvious to us that God is up to something. God believes in them. God is creating something wondrous in them that will not only sustain them in the days to come but will also be a blessing to so many in so many differing ways. We celebrate this day because it reminds us of just how important good and faithful seed slinging really is and how equally important it is for us to believe and trust in this God who takes these seeds and somehow makes them grow. Secretly, quietly, amazingly, mysteriously God teases new life from the seeds we toss until one morning we rise up and discover that something unbelievably beautiful has sprung up from the barren ground. Indeed, so beautiful that the best response we can stammer out is...to God alone be all the Glory! Amen.