

Seven or eight years ago, when Jessa and I moved into our first real house with our first real yard, I got garden fever. I rented a tiller and tilled about a 10x25 foot plot in the back yard. I bought one of those round plastic composting devices, and all through the fall and winter I fed our food waste and lawn clippings into it.

Potato peels, the parts of fruits and vegetables with the stems attached, the guts from our Halloween jack-o-lanterns, grass from the mower, coffee grinds, eggshells—all of it went into the bin. All winter long I turned that plastic bin, watching all the leftovers turn into compost. When spring came, I could hardly contain myself. I spread the compost all over the garden, turned it into the soil, planted my seeds, stood back to admire my handiwork, and waited.

A few weeks later, the seeds started to sprout. Sure enough, things were growing better with the compost; the tomatoes were shooting up, and the okra was getting tall. But after a month or so, I started noticing something weird. There were vines everywhere, all over the garden, climbing along the ground and climbing up the tomato plants, taking over everything. I thought maybe I had forgotten where I had planted the cucumbers or the zucchini, and planted them in more than one spot. One morning in June I went out to water the garden, and on one of the vines was the biggest, orangest flower I had ever seen. When I went

out the next day there was another, and another, until my garden was a sea of vines and orange flowers.

The gardeners out there have probably already figured out what went wrong. The culprit was the insides from the Halloween jack-o-lanterns. All of that gooey icky stuff on the inside of a pumpkin—that stuff is about fifty percent seeds. I had taken the insides of those pumpkins, with all of their seeds, and mixed that with fertile compost, and turned it into the soil in my garden. Whatever other stuff I planted that year was quickly overwhelmed by my 25 by 10 foot pumpkin patch.

I came away from that experience with two things. The first was a lot of pumpkins; enough to give them away to the neighbors and the kids down the street. The second, though, was an immense appreciation for the power of seeds. If you really think about them, seeds are amazing things. Seeds are things born out of death. A seed is what happens when a plant sacrifices a part of itself—in the form of a fruit or a grain or the innards of a pumpkin—knowing that the seed won't live until all or part of the mother plant has died. Seeds are the promise of new life, but not just the promise—seeds are the evidence that the universe

trusts that life will always be reborn. Seeds are a demonstration that the world has faith in tomorrow.

Today we're talking about some of the experiences our High School youth had while they were on their mission trip to New Orleans. In July three dozen of us from Colorado traveled to New Orleans to spend twelve days working with the people of that city to rebuild what they had lost four years earlier in hurricanes Katrina and Rita. I've told you one story about seeds, about how life finds a way even when it's an unexpected way. I'd like to tell you a few more stories about the seeds we saw planted and the seeds we saw growing in our time in Louisiana.

Vance's wife Jeannie was already dying of cancer when she started to insist that they should move to New Orleans. She had seen the devastation from the storms on the news, and despite her illness, she knew she wanted to help. So Vance and Jeannie moved to New Orleans, and they started working, running a mission center there—the same mission center we stayed in the last two years. Not long after they moved, just like they had expected it would, the cancer took Jeannie's life, but Vance decided to stay on, helping the people of New Orleans in part to honor her memory. The agency he runs, the Westside Christian Mission, has

rebuilt homes all over New Orleans, mostly in the poorest and hardest-hit neighborhoods of the city.

As Vance tells it, one day he was driving through one of those neighborhoods, one that was hard-hit even before fifteen or twenty feet of flood water rolled through, the city's Lower Ninth Ward. He drove by a church, and outside he saw an elderly man, in his eighties, the pastor of the church, alone, methodically carrying debris out of the building and putting it on a pile outside. Vance stopped his car. He says he asked the elderly man one question: "Pastor, where's your help?" The man responded silently, by simply pointing to the sky. At that moment, Vance decided that his organization and its army of volunteers would help this man rebuild his church. The man was Pastor Howard Washington, the church was Greater New Jerusalem Baptist Church, and the volunteers were us.

That was last summer. On last year's mission trip, we worked in groups, some at people's homes, and some at Greater New Jerusalem. The church was a mess. The flood waters had reached 16 feet high, up above the baptistery and the balcony on the second floor. All the walls had to be torn out. All the windows had

to be replaced. Everything was rotting from the stagnant flood waters that lingered for weeks after the storm. The floor had been stripped to bare concrete. We worked for a week in that church, just like hundreds of volunteers before and after us would work, putting it back together, piece by piece. The work began before we got there and it continued after we left, but for a time, we were the ones who watered the seed.

This summer we went back. This year we worked on different sites, but we did get a chance to go back and visit the places we had worked last summer. We visited the home of Ms. Williams, in the Gentilly neighborhood, which was almost finished a year after we had worked on it. We visited the home of Ray and Clara, an elderly couple duped by crooked contractors who took their money and left; Ray and Clara had just moved back to the city after their house was completed by volunteers working for free. And we visited Greater New Jerusalem Baptist Church. We visited on a Sunday morning, and we worshipped with their small but growing congregation.

It is a wondrous thing to see a seed sprout and grow. What had been a flooded-out and rotting shell of a building in 2008 had become a beautiful and vibrant church in 2009. Where there had been no signs of life aside from the mosquitoes and the spiders, the air was now filled with spirit and the buzzing voices of children dressed for church. Where there had once been only one man in his early eighties, hauling trash out of a demolished building, there was now a church—a community in full flower, growing stronger every day in the middle of a neighborhood that desperately needs new life. We did not plant that seed, and we will not be there to harvest it, but we did water it; we, you and us, watered it. Along with hundreds of volunteers and thousands of people like you, who sent and supported those volunteers, we helped that community grow from a place where it would have been difficult to see any life to a place where life flourished.

Here's another, older story about seeds. Once upon a time, in the land of Judea, what's now Israel, a particular kind of tree dominated the landscape. It was called the Judean Date Palm tree, and it was everywhere all over the land. Its oil and its fruit were among the region's main exports, and the tree was known for its medicinal properties. It was so associated with the area that the Romans used it

on coins to signify the province of Judea. The area around the Dead Sea used to hold massive plantations of Judean Date Palm trees. As hard as it is to imagine now, that barren landscape was once green with the palms, so much so that it was a popular tourist destination from all over the Roman Empire. The oil, the fruit, the medicine, and the shade of the Date Palm sustained the people of Judea for centuries.

Something happened, though. Along the way, the Judean Date Palm fell victim to wars and neglect, and not long after the time of Christ the tree became extinct. It's difficult to believe that something so common could die out, but that's what happened. It disappeared from the face of the earth, and all of its benefits were lost, and the tree was remembered only in folklore and from those Roman coins with the picture of the palm tree on them. Two thousand years later, in the 1970s, some archaeologists were excavating Herod's residence on Masada, the famous palace fortress in the Judean desert. They discovered a jar with a collection of seeds inside. They were Judean Date Palm seeds, a remnant of a time when the plant provided food for kings. The seeds were dried out, and some of them were even turning to dust, and they were valuable really only as artifacts,

as an example of something that no longer existed. Those archaeologists put the seeds into storage somewhere, and there they sat until 2005. In 2005, they took one of the seeds, on a hunch, and they planted it. They took the seed and they stuck it in some dirt to see what would happen. It was a pretty foolish thing to do; until then, the oldest seed ever germinated was a 1200 year old lotus seed in China. The Date Palm seed was almost 800 years older than that. There was almost no chance that anything would come of their little experiment.

But since this is a sermon about the power of seeds, you've already figured out what happened. It sprouted. About six weeks after they planted it, a tiny green shoot poked out of the earth. They named that shoot Methuselah, after the character in the Bible who lived to 969 years old. Today the tree is about 4 years old and 4 feet tall and still growing. If it's a female tree, they think it might produce fruit by next year. Fruit from a tree born of a seed that sat in darkness for two thousand years, waiting for the chance to grow. Life from something that was supposed to have been long dead. A green shoot from a seed that was turning to dust.

This summer in New Orleans we worked at a place we called the Community Center. It was an old corner store in the Lowerline neighborhood, which was the kind of neighborhood that caused Vance the mission center supervisor to pull me aside and remind me that our youth had to be out of there by dark. For decades, that store had sat on that corner, selling groceries and light lunches at the snack bar to people in the neighborhood. One woman who walked by told us with some pride that she used to be a cook at that store, making sandwiches for the customers. Now, though, the sign was still on the front door, right where it was left in late August of 2005: Sorry, we're closed. The store that supported a community for decades now sat empty.

A group called Elijah Christian Ministries had bought the property, along with a couple of buildings around it. They gutted the store to make a community center for the neighborhood kids. The leader of their group told us that they wanted a place for the neighborhood kids to go to escape the pressures of the streets. The community center, rescued from the destruction of a hurricane, would provide shelter from the storms that raged around the lives of the neighborhood's young people. And the buildings nearby—they were being converted into eight

apartments. Once they were finished, those apartments would be rented to New Orleans residents returning to the city. They called it transitional housing; residents would pay rent to live there while they repaired and rebuilt their own homes elsewhere in the city, and when they moved out, the rent money they had been paying in would be given back to them in a lump sum to help restart their lives in their own homes. We worked on seven of the apartments; the eighth was already occupied by someone trying to rebuild her life.

These are some powerful seeds. They remind me of the way grass can push its way through asphalt, or the way a pine seed that sprouts in a crack in the granite up in the mountains can over time push it apart. These seeds are patient; many of the people whose lives they will change have not even been born yet. And they are bold, unintimidated by layers of asphalt or walls of granite, undeterred by political neglect or racism or the forces of hurricanes. When you look at them—when you look at the fresh paint going on the walls of those apartments next door to that community center—you can have faith that life will go on, that there will be a tomorrow.

Seeds are the evidence that the universe trusts that life will always be reborn. A commitment to children and youth is the evidence that a church trusts that it will be here in fifty or a hundred years. If the young people in our congregation are the seeds we have planted, then I am here to tell you that I see green shoots poking up everywhere. Our society tells us that teenagers today are self-centered and spoiled, but I saw two dozen of them from this church alone take weeks out of their summer to sweat in the hot Louisiana sun helping someone else. Sometimes as adults we have a hard time dealing with the rowdiness or messiness of teenagers, but I watched our youth clean up a pile of storm debris waist-high and the size of our Commons Room, until all that was left was a courtyard ready for children to play in. Sometimes we assume that the faith of a young person is simpler and less developed than ours, but if that's what caused them to give themselves so selflessly to and completely to helping someone else, then thank God for that.

Many are the seeds that are lying in wait in the ground right now, ready to sprout, and many are the green shoots poking their way out of the soil, in New Orleans and here at First Plymouth, in the lives in people young and not so young alike.

Let us trust that life will go on, and even more than that, let us have faith that life will flourish. Let us plant the seeds that God is calling us to plant. Let us together, as a community of faith, tend and water those places here in this church and anywhere people are in need, those places where God is bringing new life. And most of all, let us thank God for the new life God brings, here in this church and in each of us, and let us thank God for the new life growing out of the ruins of New Orleans. Amen.