

Seeds of grace

A new reformation of the seed and the corn is evolving.

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The Incas, at the peak of their civilization, had 150 varieties of corn. When the Spanish came, they wiped most of these out—even destroying much of the seed corn, so that a civilization of extraordinary vitality and diversity became an impoverished one. My best souvenir from Machu Pichu is a 50-cent strip of seeds, a sample of the kinds of corn that were prevalent in Incan civilization.

Jesus had a lot to say about seeds as the basis of civilization. The parable of the sower appears in all three synoptic Gospels, and in very similar form. It's important to note that the story isn't about the seed. It's about the sower, and the four kinds of soil: the wayside soil, the rocky soil, the thorny soil and finally the good soil, in which things grow and bear fruit and from which we get food to eat. The final soil is the good culture.

United Church of Christ president John Thomas observed recently that the church is at a moment of important change in the way our seed and soil are evolving. We have succeeded at creating a culture that has two important crops: moral engagement and critical interpretation of the Bible. Now there are two new urgencies growing among us: the sacramental presence of God in Jesus and, in a renewing resurgence from our past, evangelical fervor. Both take us toward an integration of heart and head, to a place beyond obligation. We have been heady. We have been so obliged as a people to do good and to think good that we have rarely *felt* good or known passion.

In his new [book](#), James Carroll criticizes the Catholic Church: "A feeling of unworthiness is the core of my selfhood, and I know exactly where I get it." But sacramental presence is something beyond self-loathing. Sacramental experience is

a feeling of worthiness at the core of our selfhood. It is knowledge of the holy in the ordinary.

Yet we are still trying to earn our worthiness, as though the Reformation never happened. According to Thomas, the church has treated the world as a giant home improvement project—we have the world's longest to-do list. But a new reformation of the seed and the corn is evolving. To moral engagement and intellectual excellence we add a sense of peace and passion about living. This moves us from obligation to grace.

Consider the Old Testament reading's [lofty cedar](#), and how it came and went. Consider Paul's [assertion](#) that when we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. These are metaphors for the fact that, while any of our particular genetic combinations is impermanent, life itself is permanent and ongoing. The tree lives, then dies, but birds continue to nest in it. Today we live at home in our bodies, but later we will live in the Lord.

Eternity is seed corn that goes on and on.