

“The Mustard Seed Life”

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Mark 4:26-34

He also said, “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.”

30 He also said, “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.”

33 With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; 34 he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The kingdom of God...

We find that phrase 14 times in Mark’s gospel.

It’s a key concept.

But, in the first century the kingdom of God seemed like a pipe dream. The ancient world was dominated by Caesar’s kingdom, the Roman empire.

We have a hard time imagining the power and might of Rome. Every facet of life was controlled by Emperor and his minions.

But, Jesus suggests that there is another kingdom, a kingdom that is more powerful than Caesar’s kingdom

You might not see it now.
It's small.
It's barely noticeable.

But, this kingdom is coming.

To paraphrase the Lord's prayer,
God's will will be done...on earth as it is in heaven.

THE PARABLE OF THE GROWING SEED

How could Jesus help his disciples imagine a different world?

How could he help his disciples have faith
when all around them were signs of Roman might and oppression?

He used parables.
Parables are stories that point beyond themselves to a greater reality.

Jesus said,
"The kingdom of God is like someone scattering seed on the ground.
At first it seems like nothing is going to happen.
Day after day nothing happens.

But, then the seed sprouts and grows automatically.
Each day the wheat develops.

First, the stalk, then the head, and then the full grain.
And finally, it's time for the harvest."

The kingdom of God is like that.

You may have noticed that we're singing a "Thanksgiving hymn" this morning
in the middle of summer!

I bet some of you saw that and said,
"That crazy preacher is at it again!"
I am.

But, I'm doing it for a reason.

In "Come, Ye Thankful People Come" there's a line that refers to this passage.

It goes, "First the blade, and then the ear, then the full corn shall appear."

When harvest time arrived people had a profound sense of gratitude.

In an agrarian society, they gave thanks with all their heart because a good crop spelled the difference between life and death.

And yet the process was,
in many ways, a profound mystery.

I wonder if that's why some people love gardening.
The process of planting and growing connects them with the mystery of new life.

On my vacation I visited my brother in law.

His garden is filled with fruit trees and various vegetables.

Not only is the food that he grows delicious and pesticide free; his garden gives him great satisfaction.

He seemed most content when he was in his garden.

Jesus said that the kingdom of God is kind of like that. There is growth and nourishment and wonder.

And just as the earth produces fruits that sustain us,
so the kingdom of God is a work of pure grace.

His kingdom will come.
His will will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

In order to believe that,
we have to trust the Lord of the harvest.

Just as God blesses us with a harvest of delicious food; so God will (as the Apostle Paul put it) make all things work together for good for those who are called according to His purpose.

The blessings of harvest point to a greater harvest.
The hymn puts it this way,

“Even so, Lord quickly come;
to Thy final harvest home;
Gather Thou Thy people in;
Free from sorrow, free from sin.”

This is the spiritual principle.
Use the blessings of this day to help you imagine a greater salvation.
Think of the harvest, the good things in your life, as a sign of the kingdom that comes.

BAD NEWS

We are fortunate to live in a free society.
We have no Caesar who tells us what to do.

But, there are still other kingdoms
that intrude on our life,
other forces that seem to be stronger than God’s kingdom.

The reign of God still remains hidden.
The signs of hope are still small and hard to see.

If you watch the news on TV you know this is true.
The news is almost always bad.

The poor are still exploited by the rich and powerful.
Politicians lack integrity.
People hurt each other in ways that exceptionally cruel.

And all this bad news takes a toll on us.

When we look at what’s going on in our world,
we begin to count our troubles instead of our blessings.

We resign ourselves to living in a world that is not what God intended it to be. We become cynics instead of evangelists.

We are deaf to the message of the parable.
We cannot believe the good news
because we are overwhelmed by the bad news.

Paul's second letter to Timothy is an example
of how the bad news can sometimes overwhelm even the most faithful life.

Paul had preached the gospel all over the ancient world.

And for his efforts he was beaten, stoned and imprisoned.

Now at the end of his life he is awaiting execution.

But, what made it worse was
it looked like all his efforts were in vain.

He wrote, "...everyone has deserted me."

Churches that he had planted were self-destructing.

In the face of persecution many were forsaking the faith.

No one came to Paul's defense
when he was denounced by the faithless.

It looked like the seeds of faith that Paul had planted all over the ancient
world

...were destined to die of frostbite.

THE POWERFUL SEED OF THE GOSPEL

But, Paul still had faith in his darkest hour.

Despite the dire circumstances, he believed the seed of the gospel would
be stronger than the powers of darkness.

And so an imprisoned and condemned apostle writes to Timothy,

“I know the one in whom I have put my trust,
and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day
what I have entrusted to him.” (2 Timothy 1:12)

Paul’s faith was not misplaced.

The gospel seed that Paul had planted would soon blossom into a growing vibrant church.

The persecution that the early church experienced would not destroy it.

On the contrary, the church would grow even stronger because of her struggle.

This was a testament to the power of the gospel.

The seed that had been planted in the hearts of the people would not be uprooted by persecution or unfaithfulness.

The success and growth of the church was sure
because the power of God was in the gospel seed.

Things will not always go well in our lives.

Sometimes it will seem like the seed that we plant fails to grow.

And that’s when we need to remember this parable.

The power is not in the sower.

The power is in the seed.

The power is in the promise of God.

THE WEEK KIRK CONFERENCE

When I was a young pastor I served a very small, struggling church in Virginia.

I tried my best to serve that church faithfully.

But, it seemed like no matter what I did, the church didn't grow.

Quite frankly, I sometimes wondered if my work made any difference at all.

And I became very discouraged.

But, one summer I took a week of continuing education and went to Montreal for a small church conference.

To give it a Scottish flair they called it the “Wee Kirk” conference.

One of the presenters at the Wee Kirk conference was ironically, the pastor of the largest church in our denomination!

But, he had a word that helped me in my time of discouragement.

He told a story about a veteran pastor in North Carolina who was giving counsel to a new pastor.

That new pastor was a lot like me.

He was trying very hard to minister to the needs of his small congregation, but nothing was happening.

The young man was discouraged by his lack of success and confided his frustration to the more experienced pastor.

The experienced pastor asked,
“Are you sowing the seed?”
“I am.”

Are you preaching the word?
“Yes sir, I am.”

“Then quit digging it up to see if it has sprouted.”

That was a word that I needed to hear.
And it’s a story that I have revisited from time to time during my career.

Self-doubt and fear often get in the way of ministry.

And I dare say that self-doubt and fear are roadblocks to your journey of faith as well.

Instead of sowing the seed,

we dig up the seeds we have planted to see if they have sprouted.

That is not a good gardening technique!

IMPATIENT AND HARD OF HEARING

A good gardener must have patience.
And the life of faith requires us to have patience as well.

We must trust in the power of the seed, the power of God's word.

Throughout the Bible we read about the power of God's word.

For example, Isaiah (55:11) wrote that the word which comes from God's mouth will not return to him empty, but will accomplish the purpose for which it was sent.

God's word has the power to change things.
And God's word has the power to change us.

But, we must have patience and allow time for God's word to work, in our life and in the world.

Jesus' disciples were a lot like us.
They weren't very patient when it came to the kingdom of God.

Instead of waiting for the seed to grow,
they impatiently came to Jesus with their own ideas about the kingdom.

Over and over again Jesus took them aside and explained it all to them.

But, they had a hard time hearing what Jesus had to say. They were still inclined to trust in their own abilities instead of the power of the gospel seed.

And then something happened that finally enabled them to hear.

In the gospel of John Jesus said,

“Very truly, I tell you,
 unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,
 it remains just a single grain;
 but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12:24)

Jesus was talking about himself.
 He was the seed that would fall into the earth and die.
 He was crucified on a garbage dump outside of Jerusalem.

And his body was “planted” in a garden tomb.

But, that was not the end of the story.

Jesus was the Word of God in the flesh.
 And just as a seed sprouts and grows in the ground,
 this Seed sprouted on Easter morn.

Jesus had risen.
 And he came back to his disciples to forgive them
 and teach them once more about the kingdom.

Finally, empowered by the Spirit, the disciples were able to hear. And they
 spread the seed of God’s word throughout the world.

And the seed of Christ bore much fruit indeed.

FAITH AND PATIENCE

Jesus can help us with our hearing problem.
 We too can hear the good news...
 IF we have faith.

And today’s lesson suggests that faith begins with patience. Faith begins
 when we trust the Lord of the Harvest to give us what we need.

“Give us this day our daily bread” is our prayer.
 And it’s a prayer not only for today, but also a prayer for tomorrow.

The God who miraculously provides a bountiful harvest today can also fix
 what’s wrong with us and with our world tomorrow.

There's no reason to despair.
There's no reason to "hunker down"
and just try to care for our own needs.

We can afford to be generous because we believe in the Lord of the harvest.

As Paul put it in his second letter to the Corinthians:
In Christ there is a new creation.
The old will pass away and the new will come.

In order to help us believe that promise,
Jesus gives us another parable.
This story points us toward the glory of God's future despite small beginnings.

THE MUSTARD SEED

He says,
"The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed."

Now the mustard seed is really small.
But, when that seed germinates, it creates a huge bush that shelters and feeds the birds of the air.

Who would have thought that such a huge plant could come from such a small seed?

Well, the kingdom of God is the like that.

The important moments in life are not always apparent. Sometimes the smallest seed can bring the greatest harvest.

I think this is very encouraging.
We don't need great faith.
We just need mustard seed faith.

We don't have to do everything.

We just need to proclaim the word of grace and trust in the promise.

And one day the Lord of the Harvest will come again. There are signs of this all around us.

TWO CENTS A MEAL

Most of us in this church know about the 2 cents a meal offering.

Each person is asked to put aside 2 cents a meal and then bring that offering once a month.

The children joyfully collect that offering much to our delight, and the money is used to help feed hungry people here and abroad.

But, when the 2 cents a meal offering was instituted at one of my former Presbyteries, some were reluctant to participate.

They were afraid that people would quit giving to our other causes and besides they asked:

“How much money can really be raised when we only give 2 cents a meal?”

The Presbytery voted to institute the 2 cents a meal offering with one provision.

We would evaluate giving patterns in a year, and decide whether to continue with the program.

After a year we heard the report.

What they found was this:

the giving to our old benevolence projects actually increased.

And the 2 cents a meal project?

It was the largest and most successful benevolence project in our whole Presbytery.

Every year when it came time to report on the two cents a meal project, the committee told this story.

It became a kind of parable of God’s grace and provision.

And every year the offering was greater than the year before!

God took our 2 cents worth, our mustard seed and made it the biggest plant in the Presbytery.

That's still true today.

The 2 cents a meal offering is still one of the most successful offerings in our denomination.

I'm happy that we're able to help so many hungry people with this offering.

But, sometimes I wonder if the success of this offering is about more than feeding the hungry.

Maybe it is God's way of reminding us of this parable.

God takes a tiny little seed and turns it into a beautiful productive plant that feeds many.

God takes our "two cents worth" and makes it into an important contribution.

It's a sign of something even bigger, the kingdom that comes.

God's kingdom.

SELF TALK AND GOD TALK

I firmly believe that it's important for us to monitor our speech.

What stories do we tell?

And what do those stories say about what we really believe?

Have you noticed how many movies and TV shows imagine a world that is totally messed up and beyond redemption?

In this dystopian view of the world, zombies roam the earth and evil runs rampant.

I think those stories are a reflection of what many people are saying to themselves and to others.

They throw up their hands and say that what we do doesn't make any difference.

We're on the path to ruin.
It's the end of the world as we know it.

Christians don't believe those stories because we live by a different story.

We believe that God sent a tiny mustard seed,
one man into the world, his Son.

And why did God do it?
Not to condemn the world,
but that the world might be saved.

That's the story that we tell.
We tell that story to ourselves,
to each other, and to the world.

You see, we don't live by the world's rules.
We don't buy into the world's pessimistic view of the future.

We live by God's rule,
a rule that promotes justice, mercy, humility
and a vision of salvation that knows no boundaries.

Guess which story is going to prevail in the end?

His kingdom comes.
His will will be done.

This is the story that shapes our life.
This is the mustard seed life.

Amen.