

“Miracle Grow”
Texts: II Corinthians 5:14-17; Mark 4:26-34
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June 14, 2009

The kingdom of God is as if...Mark 4:26a

There is a story from the Hebrew tradition that goes like this: When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go to a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished: misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Rabbi Mezritch had need to avoid catastrophe, he would go to the same place in the forest and say, “Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I'm still able to say the prayer.” Again, the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moseh-Lieb, in order to save his people once more would go to the forest and say, “I know not how to light the fire. I do not know the words to the prayer, but I know the place, and this must be sufficient.” It was sufficient, and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to save his people. This Rabbi sat in his armchair, his head in his hands. He spoke to God, “I'm unable to light the fire. I don't know the prayer. I cannot even find a place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story of the place and the fire and the prayer. And I hope it will be sufficient.” And it was sufficient, and the people were saved.

The great Jewish leader, Elie Wiesel, tells this story and concludes by saying that God made [human beings] because God loves stories. (*The Gates of the Forest*)

Jesus certainly loved them, stories, I mean. The first three Gospels are full of them - 40 or so altogether. His parables are more than just good stories. They “reflect with peculiar clarity the nature of the good news, the necessity of being prepared for the end times, the intensity of Christ's call to repentance.” They reveal time and time again his conflict with the religious legalism of his day. (1)

Jesus was not the only one who told parables in the region of the Galilee. It was a common form of storytelling. The storyteller would point to something, or remember a common event, and use the event or the material object to reveal a larger meaning. Jesus' parables went deeper and broader. In that way, they were “unique in style and substance” and genuinely unparalleled in “the mastery of their construction”. They were always told within a particular context, often one of

controversy with people who disagreed with Jesus, or who were challenging him. Each parable called for an answer on the part of the hearer. (2) These were not just entertaining stories. Jesus' purpose was to save. He was the Savior of the people. Life-and-death issues were at stake.

One noted Biblical scholar writes that nowhere in the New Testament do we come closer to the Jesus who lived 2000 years ago than when we are reading the stories that he told. It is as if we were "standing right before him". (3)

Another scholar is helpful as she writes, "In contrast to a moral tale that sort of gives us an example to follow, but no momentum with which to do it, a parable can put us through an experience that challenges our basic presuppositions. If we really hear the story, we see into a mirror, and we discover that we are not what we thought. We have the freedom to be transformed into something new." (Antoinette Wire, *The Parable as a Mirror*)

My purpose in preaching on these two parables today is nothing less than transformation. That is the goal. If that happens, if your mind gets shifted a bit, then let us be grateful to the Word as it comes to us in these two little stories Jesus told. They have as their common theme the Kingdom of God, a favorite subject of Jesus. He had begun his ministry in Galilee by saying, "...the time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God is *at hand*." The kingdom is no longer something to wait and hope for; it is here, now. When we encounter Jesus in the fourth chapter of Mark, time has passed, and people are looking around and are beginning to wonder, exactly, what are the signs of the Messianic age? Nothing much seems to have changed. Could Jesus and his ragtag band really have ushered in a entire new order?

I have a friend who is the daughter of the great basketball coach Lefty Driesell. Pam was a little girl when Coach Driesell coached at Davidson College. She grew up on the campus as the darling of the students, who were all male at the time. She heard the gentlemen at Davidson speak often about "the Queens girls," coeds, of course, at the school down the road. Pam naturally thought that the fellows were dating actual queens. She was highly disappointed when she met a few Queens students and saw that they were not members of royalty, wearing crowns and emeralds.

Though Jesus had told everyone that he was the Messiah, it appeared that he was not much different from other magicians or people who came around announcing the end of the age. The old order still appeared to be operative. Other than a few healings and a controversial sermon or two, he did not appear to be King of Kings and Lord of Lords. As for the in-breaking of the kingdom, the thought "non-event" must have come to the minds of many; nevertheless, Jesus pressed on, aware that his message and his ministry were essential for the salvation of the world.

He was realistic enough to know that what he said would be misunderstood and indeed rejected outright by many, but he spoke to all who would hear: the still hopeful and the already disappointed, the scornful and the impatient. He told them all the same story: "The kingdom of God is as if someone should scatter seed on the ground and sleep and rise, day and night, and the seed would sprout and grow. He does not know how."

So there you go. Anything happening to you, anything transformational yet?

Perhaps a way to begin is to think about where God is located in the story. I know! The **sower** - the kingdom of God is if a **sower** should scatter seed upon the ground. But wait. The parable says that the sower had no idea how the seed could sprout and grow, and God is supposed to know everything. Also, if God is the one who sows the seed, you would think that God would be a little more attentive, and a little less callous toward the crop: ignoring the need to water, weed, fertilize, that kind of thing.

Last year, I decided to scatter some wildflower seeds on the hill near our place in Ellijay. I bought a big sack of wildflower seeds at Lowe's. I came back to the house; I went outside. I opened the bag; I threw out seeds by the handful, and then I went inside. That was it; that's all I did. I paid no attention to the fact that we were in the middle of a drought. I gave no thought to the fact that the soil on this hill has proven to be better for growing thistles than brown-eyed susans. Guess what happened. Nothing. Not one wildflower. Al is sorry about that, because afterwards, I insisted we hire a landscaper. What I learned from that experience is that attention must be paid. I think that if God planted something, God would pay attention, would tend to it.

But let's put God aside for a minute. (I can't believe I said that!) Let's take another approach. Maybe Jesus was wanting to encourage his disciples. He was speaking to everyone, including the disciples who would be entrusted with spreading the message. Maybe he wanted to reassure his followers that whether they knew it or not, some of their seeds - read "some of their words" - would not fall on deaf ears, that God would do something wonderful with them. I think that's wrong too. Hear the rest of the parable: "The earth produces of itself first stalk, then the head, then the full grain. Then when the grain is ripe, at once, he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come." What's the operative power in the story? What's the creative force? Believe it or not, the real actor in this parable is - the dirt! More specifically, the good soil, the good soil that is the kingdom of God. It has its own internal generativity. The underneath - everything - reality of the kingdom of God is the reason there is a harvest.

From this wonderful little story, told only in Mark, I think there is a lot to learn. The story must have been very reassuring to the early followers, since things seemed so iffy at the time - that there is this reality that underlies everything. God's power, God's grace, God's mercy, God's yearning for justice permeates this

reality. *Don't worry. Seeds are beginning to sprout even now. Before it's all over, you're going to need the spiritual equivalent of five fleets of hay wagons to hold the harvest.*

This is good news for us too. We who love to be in control are reminded that there is more going on than what we are in charge of. I think about all the conversation these days about the state of health of mainline Protestantism in America. Depending on which data you settle on, mainline Protestantism makes up either 13 or 18% of America's population today. One might conclude that God is gradually withdrawing from the original plan to heal and transform the souls of people and the society in which people live through the Presbyterian Church. I lament the decline of our national church, even as I rejoice in the health of this and many parishes across the country. I wonder if this new situation does not offer an unprecedented opportunity for our tradition to become refreshed, less bureaucratized, more of a Christian Movement made up of people who are absolutely confident that the kingdom has come, and who are gladly willing to answer the call to share God's love in an ever-changing world.

I want to put in a word this morning for international mission. Seeds are sprouting all over the place in our world today, seeds of hope and restoration, especially in Central and Latin America and Africa. There will be a harvest; the world will be restored. There will come a day when God's hour will be with us in fullness. The story of the seeds growing in secret tell me that what God has begun, God will finish, in God's own way, and through the people that God chooses.

Some years ago, I participated in a colloquy entitled "The Mission of the Church in the 21st Century." There were a number of outstanding scholars. We met together for eight weeks. We wrote a book entitled *The Mission of the Church in the 21st Century*. It is an important book that I take out and reread from time to time, but the main take away I had from that entire colloquy was this: What is the mission of the Church in the 21st century? In the church, tell the story. In the world, live the story.

The second story for today is found in Luke, Matthew, as well as Mark, and the Gospel of Thomas, which didn't even make the cut into the New Testament, so it must be an important parable. Jesus introduces it with the question: "With what shall we compare the kingdom of God? It is like a mustard seed, when sown is the smallest of all seeds" - not really, but the point is that it's tiny relative to other seeds. "But when it grows up it becomes the greatest of all shrubs, putting forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." The contrast between the smallness at the beginning and the grandness at the end is quite striking.

Strikingly, also, there are no actors. Of course, the seed is sown, but by whom is not important enough to be mentioned. The focus of attention is again on the earth itself. The soil performs the miracle of growth.

The first sermon I ever preached for my first-year homiletics class in seminary was on the parable of the mustard seed. It was a decidedly unmemorable sermon. Even I must have thought so, because I can't find a copy of it, but I've always loved the story. It has become for me, not so much a mirror as it has become a lens by which I view a lot of things. I think about how Jesus could have been born a king in a palace, but he came as a tiny baby, born to unremarkable parents in a little backwater town. I think of how, from that modest, humble beginning, his great, sacrificial love has transformed this world from a place of despair into a place where people really can legitimately live and act in hope.

I think of how this church, not so very long ago, was tinier than a mustard seed, short, we might say, on numbers of people and certainly on resources, but loaded with hope, confident about the kingdom. Now, God has given some growth, and all sorts of people come here to find rest for their souls, ways to serve their neighbors, and guidance for living in a morally complex world.

I think more about little things than big things, how when we are baptized, the little bit of water on our heads seals us in the Holy Spirit and is the sign that you and I belong to Jesus Christ forever.

Smallness is in these days; people are switching out their SUVs for Priuses. Morningside might be just the right scale. You don't have to have 2000 members and a Starbucks concession in the fellowship hall to be a church.

You don't have to have anything big or grand to spread the word of God's love around, and, my goodness, does the world need to hear and feel that love today! I think of how so many seeds are planted when people are young. Little babies are not born mean and hateful. Meanness and hatefulness come later. Think about the man who killed the guard at the Holocaust Museum and how the poisonous waters of bitterness and hatred must have been fed to his soul, until, at the age of 83, he came to the place that he had to go and kill. The only way I can deal with something like that is to remember that the enterprise I'm signed up with is the triumph of God's grace over everything that is ugly and inhumane, and that it is up to me (you too!) to bear witness to that reality.

I look at my own life through the parable of the mustard seed. So can you. Little things often turn out to be tremendously important in our lives, and the seemingly grand things seem to lose their substance and luster after a while. I no longer try to change the world. I thought I could and would when I graduated from seminary, but I have learned to live in the hope and confidence that God is changing the world. I am glad to do what I can to make whatever difference I can.

I think of the words Paul wrote to that little band of unimportant people who followed Jesus, in the sophisticated City of Corinth; *Not many of you were wise, not many powerful. Not many of noble birth, but God chose things that are not, to*

reduce to nothing the things that are, for God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. (I Corinthians 1:25 ff.) I believe the kingdom of God operates just the way Paul says it does.

Can I close with a personal story, one I imagine, or I like to imagine, God might like. It is not about seeds; it is about my mother's Bible. When she died in the mid-90s, her Bible came to me. Mother had been a minister's daughter in south Georgia. She came from a family that was modest in worldly things but rich in love. The Bible that I inherited was given to her as a Christmas gift. It says on the inside: "To Helen from [her much older brother] Ralph, Christmas, 1923." The Bible is, of course, the King James Bible, and by the time it came into my hands, I was using the New Revised Standard Version. I put the Bible on the shelf, where it has stayed for many years as a keepsake.

One day, a couple of years ago, I picked it up and opened it. It fell open at random, no bookmark, to the second chapter of Colossians. The pages are yellow in this old, crumbly Bible, but there, by one of the verses, my mother had written two words with a pencil. The words are "For Jo." She always called me "Jo". Here is the verse: "For though I am absent in the flesh, I am with you in spirit, joying and beholding . . . the steadfastness of your faith in Christ." (2:5)

She had no way of knowing I would ever see what she had written, and I didn't have any idea it was there, but there it was. The point of this story is: Never think that the little, mustard seedy things you do in love don't count for much. They make all the difference in the world.

(1) *Joachim Jeremias, Rediscovering the Parables*, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966.

(2) *Ibid.*

(3) *Ibid.*