

“Kingdom Seeds”

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13; Mark 4:26-34

The Kingdom of God, Jesus said in one of his many parables on the subject, is like someone who plants radishes or peas or, God forbid, kohlrabi or brussel sprouts. Jesus' parables were always down to earth, related to every day life. So here he talks about something just about everyone knows something about -- planting seeds.

The person in the parable plants the seeds and then pretty much forgets about it, going to work day after day, eating, sleeping, taking in a show, doing the laundry, changing the oil in the car, getting a hair cut. But all the while this person is carrying on his or her normal life, a miracle is happening! The seeds are sprouting, growing, pushing their way up through the soil. And then one fine day our back-yard gardener returns to check on the garden, and low and behold, there they are, these young tender plants, the beginning of what will eventually be a harvest.

Jesus says that the seed sprouts and grows “automatically,” the meaning of the Greek word in the text. It happens automatically. The gardener doesn't even really know how it works. But that is ok. The process is not dependent upon the gardener's understanding of horticulture or soil chemistry or cell structure. And when the time comes, there are those colorful radishes or those sweet tasting peas to be shelled and served. That, says Jesus, is what the Kingdom of God is like. Some things just happen in the Kingdom of God, not because we are so clever or creative, not because we have done such wonderful things, but just because they happen.

It is always tempting to think that it is what we do or don't do that makes the difference. We have our part, to be sure. There are some seeds to be scattered. It is not that automatic! But once we have done our part, the rest happens by the miracle of grace or by the power of the Holy Spirit or something. We don't really know. We don't have to know! And it doesn't help any to fret or fuss over the seed.

Now, of course, I can hear some of the gardeners out there thinking. I can see the troubled looks on their faces. They are objecting to that word “automatic.” As every gardener knows, it is not completely automatic. The soil has to be prepared, fertilized, watered, weeded. But I think that the point Jesus is making is that the actual process of germination and growth is not something that we as gardeners can make happen. All we can do is try to provide the right conditions. And the growth happens automatically.

Provide the right conditions....It sets the mind to thinking. Being a church person, the first thing that comes to my mind is what we do here. We are always talking about making the church grow. What can we do to attract more people? That is the question that the leaders of the church, this and nearly every other church, are always asking. There are, definitely, some things that we can do. But there are others that we must leave to the spirit.

In the category of what we can do comes creating the right conditions for growth. So what are the right conditions? There could be many different answers to that question. But here is the answer I would give. The right conditions include, first of all, creating a safe place. We need to provide an atmosphere that is safe for people. And I don't necessarily mean a safe place physically, although more and more churches are becoming conscious of the need for that as well. I am thinking more about a place where it is safe to express an opinion, or to ask a question, or to wonder about something. A pastor of another church recently said that people in that congregation were afraid to speak up during Bible studies or adult classes because a previous pastor had been so dogmatic. It was not safe to ask questions or to express opinions.

One of the conditions that is important in a church setting, in my mind, is that it be a place where people feel safe to express their thoughts freely. The attitude and atmosphere I have always felt it important to promote is that there are no questions that are out of bounds. There are no subjects that are off limits. This is a place of free and open inquiry, a place of exploration.

John Dominic Crossan, a well-known biblical scholar, has said that the very fact that Jesus chose to speak often in parables meant that he left himself open to interpretation. People could go away from a parable with different understandings of what he was trying to say. That point has been aptly illustrated by the many different meanings attached to each of Jesus' parables by the various commentaries.

Another important ingredient in creating the right conditions for growth is acceptance, being a welcoming congregation where anyone who comes would feel that if they wanted to, they could make this their church home. Of course there is a difference between a welcoming congregation and a desperate one. The desperate or needy congregation tries to glom onto visitors, to begin to think immediately that here is a potential new member. But the welcoming congregation is happy to welcome anyone into its fellowship whether or not this person is a prospective new member. The welcoming congregation tries to provide a place of healing and support for all who come.

So that is our part. We try to create the right conditions. But we don't do it all – some of it happens "automatically," which maybe is a code word for the work of the Spirit. Jesus' parable tells us that ultimately, if something is going to happen in a person's life, it is probably due to something beyond our efforts – it is the work of the Spirit. So that is one of the parables that Jesus told.

But then again, Jesus said, the Kingdom of God is like something else – it is like a tiny little mustard seed, one of the smallest of seeds, that, when planted, produces a huge shrub with branches in which birds build their nests. Which seems to suggest that sometimes, at least, the seeds of the Kingdom, those efforts that lead eventually to something noteworthy, may not look like much, may be pretty unimpressive.

Now we have to be careful here because there are a couple of "mustard seed" references in the Gospels. In another place Jesus says to his disciples that if they have faith even as small as a grain of mustard seed they will be able to say to this mountain, "be cast into the sea," and it will happen. It's related, but not quite the same as this parable about the Kingdom of God.

When I was growing up the Christian Book stores were selling jewelry and one of the items was a necklace that held a little round piece of glass that was magnified and inside the glass was a mustard seed. I guess the idea was to remind people of something, but I'm not sure that anyone really knew what it was they were supposed to remember.

So what did Jesus mean that the Kingdom of God was like a mustard seed, one of the smallest of all seeds, that when planted in the ground eventually became one of the greatest of all shrubs with the birds building nests in its branches? What did he mean by that? Again, there are lots of different theories, because Jesus left it open to interpretation. I will offer mine.

What I think Jesus meant is that there are no insignificant acts, nothing that is too small to count in the Kingdom of God. We should not think that when we are inspired to do a kindness for someone, however small, that it is insignificant. What was it Jesus said, that even a cup of water given in his name would not go unrewarded?

Looking through resources in preparing for this sermon I came across a prayer written by the poet Christina Rossetti that goes like this:

*Give us grace, O Lord, to work while it is day,
fulfilling diligently and patiently whatever duty Thou appointest us;
doing small things in the day of small things,
and great labours if Thou summon us to any:
rising and working, sitting still and suffering,
according to Thy word.*

Doing small things in the day of small things, and great labours if Thou summon us to any! What a great expression – the day of small things! The truth is that most days fall into that category and only rarely are any of us summoned to great labors. What are the mustard seeds that need to be planted today? Maybe it is nothing great at all, but rather something very small indeed – a phone call, a card, a visit, a kindness directed at someone who could use a kindness, a deed forgotten nearly as soon as it is accomplished. Such are the seeds of the Kingdom of God, and from them great shrubs are grown. Not everyone is called to go on a mission trip or work in a prison ministry or serve on a church board, but every one of us has the opportunity to plant some Kingdom seeds every day.

The very fact that Jesus chose the mustard seed to use as his illustration in this parable says something profound. The mustard seed was really considered a weed. It proliferated so rapidly that it really was something to be avoided and controlled rather than planted. As a matter of fact, in the rabbinical literature the planting of a mustard seed in a garden was forbidden. It had to do with maintaining purity and not mixing diverse kinds of seeds. So that not only is Jesus talking about a seed that is very small, he is also talking about a seed that was considered worthless and in a sense unclean, and unwelcome. And yet, this is the symbol he uses for the Kingdom of God. Be careful not to dismiss that which seems to be worthless, no account.

The first reading this morning is a good example of that – Samuel going to Bethlehem to anoint the new king that would replace King Saul. All Samuel knew was that it was going to be one of the sons of Jesse. So he told Jesse to bring his sons out for inspection. So Jesse brought his sons out – fine looking, strapping young men. Saul took one look at the first one, Eliab, and he said to himself: here he is! No need to look further. But then he heard God whisper to him, “Don’t look at his appearance or his stature, or how strong he is or how high he can jump. God looks on the heart.” Same thing with the next one, Abinadab and with Shammah and with all seven of the sons that Jesse brought with him. Finally, Samuel said, “Are all your sons here?” And Jesse said, “There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.” You can hear it in his voice, can’t you? He is “no account.” He’s too little, too young, too scrawny, not bright enough, not strong enough. His own father didn’t even think it was worth bringing him along. And David, of course, was the Lord’s anointed.

The Kingdom of God is like a worthless, unclean, no account mustard seed, not much good for anything. Except that if you plant it, it can grow into a huge scrub in the branches of which birds can build their nests. That is what the Kingdom of God is like.