

Today's gospel reading from Mark includes two short parables: the parable of the man who scattered seed on the ground and the parable of the mustard seed. But before we consider these two particular parables let's review what makes a *parable* a parable.

First, when Jesus told parables he used common, ordinary items or objects with which his hearers were very familiar in order to help people understand. It's not unlike what I do in a children's message when I always use some sort of object with which the children are familiar. Jesus likewise used ordinary objects, but he then painted scenarios that depict *something more* than what he actually describes in the parable. In other words, Jesus' often used metaphors in his parables that invite us to ask: "To what more or to what else does it refer?"¹ Parables are like riddles that are "intended to tease our minds into insight rather than communicate a simple idea by means of an illustration."² Parables challenge us to think "outside the box" when we consider God's activity in this world. They are springboards that encourage us to examine our assumptions: assumptions we may hold about the reality of our own lives; and assumptions we may hold about what life in the Kingdom of God might be like. So today we need to ask ourselves what insights Jesus might be hoping we'll glean from the two parables we have just heard.

To do this, I want first to make some observations about each parable, provide a current day illustration, and then come back to the question of what insights we might glean from them.

Jesus begins the first parable by saying that "*the kingdom of God is as if...*" This tells us right up front that this parable is about the "kingdom of God." In the parable, someone goes out and scatters seed on the ground; the seed sprouts and grows – first the stalk, then the head, and then the full grain. And it doesn't appear that whoever scattered the seed does much of anything else on behalf of the seed; the seed just grows "*he does not know how.*" Or as Jesus says in the parable: "*The earth produces of itself. . .*"

Last year my husband and I had some pine trees removed from a corner in our back yard. One had died and my husband decided to have the other two removed at the same time as they were close to the house and quite old. Only plants that love shade and the acidic soil created by dropped pine needles would grow beneath the trees while they stood in place. But this spring, the first since they were removed, we watched all sorts of plants grow and proliferate until that back corner of our yard became a jungle. A variety of plants began to cover the cut wood stored under the pines for our fire place and even grow up and over the six foot privacy fence. This past week we finally hired some men to come "clean up" the yard, including other beds and areas that had become totally overgrown. Two men worked for nine hours this past Thursday and still didn't

¹Malina, Bruce J. & Rohrbauch, Richard L. *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) 102.

²Hare, Douglas R.A., *Matthew: Interpretation – A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993) 147.

finish all the necessary clean-up – they have to come back again next week. Where did all those plants come from? Certainly not from anything we had planted! As Jesus said in the parable, “*the earth indeed produces of itself.*”

Hold that image in mind – one which I suspect many of you have also experienced in your own yards – as we briefly consider the 2nd parable in which Jesus asks, “*With what can we compare the kingdom of God . . . ?*” Again, we’re told up front that this is another parable about the “kingdom of God.” This time Jesus uses the mustard seed, which, as we’ve already observed in the children’s message, is a very small seed – one of the smallest seeds known to the people of Galilee in Jesus’ day, about the size of a pin head. As we’ve already heard, mustard plants can be very invasive plants that are very hard to control.

I was struck by a story³ I read this past week by a California woman who was in need of some respite earlier this year. So in February, she and her husband decided to drive up Napa Valley from San Francisco to the Calistoga’s famed mud baths. Once they were out of the city, she observed that they began passing waves of yellow mustard plants spread across and carpeting large areas of the surrounding country side. She then remembered that just last October a series of wild fires had devastated California including Napa Valley, which left the land seared. But on this drive just a few months later she could see no evidence of the tragedy that had left the land charred and thousands of people homeless; she could see only the mustard plants waving in the breeze. She considered both the devastating effect of fire when it gets out-of-control, but also the power of those mustard plants to grow and reproduce so quickly despite the difficult conditions.⁴ Mustard seeds have an incredible ability to grow and spread.

Given these two parables, what insights might we glean from them? What do you think? What is Jesus trying to teach us about the Kingdom of God?

(Ask the congregation to respond to these questions and list responses on newsprint.)

Congregational responses on June 17, 2018 included:

1. The kingdom of God may start small, but it can grow incredibly by God’s action;
2. The kingdom of God is in God’s hands, not ours – it is God who brings about the growth;
3. We should “grow where we are planted” – God will take care of the rest;
4. The kingdom is likely to be found in *unpredictable* places (at least to our minds);
5. The kingdom of God is provided for others and not just us;
6. We don’t have to know the end result – it’s in God’s hands;
7. The harvest will produce enough for all;
8. We are called to be **faithful** in casting out the seed; rather than called to be **effective** – again, it is God who is in charge and brings about the growth.

A final story: The last time these particular gospel parables were read during worship services was three years ago in 2015. At the time I had not yet retired and that particular Sunday happened to coincide with Youth Sunday in the parish I was then serving. We had asked a graduating high

³Tate, Jeanne Choy, “Mustard You Can’t Control,” *Sunday’s Coming from the “Christian Century”* (June 17, 2018). <https://mailchi.mp/christiancentury.org/mustard-control-348367?e=692b96689f>.

⁴Mustard plants were first introduced to California by Spanish missionaries in the 1800s, who scattered the mustard seeds up and down the California coast as they traveled, exploring new mission sites.

school senior to give the sermon and she spoke about her own spiritual journey as it related to this gospel reading and the seed that had been planted in her life. I want to share some excerpts⁵ from that sermon because I found it very meaningful and inspiring.

This teen began by saying:

“To be perfectly honest, when I first started my journey as a Christian, my understanding of Jesus, God’s love and the church was much like my knowledge of the mustard seed story – I had a general awareness of what is meant and some sense of its importance but I couldn’t articulate it or explain it to others, and I wasn’t sure how it applied to *me* or what *I* was supposed to be doing with it.

“I don’t remember much of my church in Cincinnati, as I was too young then to really remember anything. But I do distinctly remember my first time coming to Sunday school [here] . . . I walked into the room to find five kids throwing pillows and tissue boxes at each other. I’m not sure what I had been expecting, but it certainly wasn’t that. Those kids scared me and I didn’t think I could ever belong in a group that acted like that – during Sunday school no less! But on that Sunday morning the seed that was planted for me grew a little bit and there was a tiny glimmer of something that made me want to go back. Maybe it was curiosity; maybe it was awe; but whatever it was, it got me to come to church – maybe not every week at first, but at least I came. Little by little, I became more integrated into that group.”

She then went on to describe how that “seed” had continued to grow through activities with the church’s youth group during her middle school years, through confirmation classes, and through summer mission trips as a high school student. She then concluded by saying:

“Now, eight years after my family and I first joined this church, I feel that my seed of faith has grown into something more than just a seed – into a little bush; maybe even a shrub. In addition to my parents who introduced me to the church and brought me here . . . I honestly have to thank those five kids . . . who I met on my first Sunday – for giving me the opportunity to connect with this nurturing Christian community. Had they not shown such an immense pleasure in just being at church together, I doubt I would have stuck with it and given it a real, honest chance. Since then, many people have guided and supported me on my journey; my family who always encourages and supports me; my friends who travel the journey with me (whether they know it or not); those serving in the church; every single member of this church for raising me up and helping me grow with God, and a few special people along the way who have inspired me and touched my life in ways they will probably never know. That being said, my journey is nowhere close to being done. We can always grow stronger in our faith, grow closer to God, and grow to embrace more people into our community.

“A mustard seed is a very small thing. But once it is planted, it can grow into a huge bush the size of a tree. In today’s Gospel, Jesus is telling us that our faith and relationship with God is the same. A little bit of faith can bring tremendous results. . . . I do not know the

⁵Hnatov, Christina: Excerpts from a sermon given at St. James’ Episcopal Church, Potomac, Maryland, on June 14, 2015.

path that lies ahead but I do know that God's hand is at work in my life and no matter where we go or what we do, we will go forward with a strong foundation that we formed here ... and with a faith based on unconditional love.”

This teen's words should challenge us to consider what evidence of growth you and I have seen in our own spiritual lives. At what stage in the kingdom of God are we in right now? Still a seed? Perhaps sprouting? Outgrowing the weeds? Or perhaps producing a harvest?⁶ Whatever stage of growth we may be experiencing, we need to remember that it is God who brings about the growth of God's kingdom. A little faith can grow as much as does a mustard seed; and that growth happens because of God's GRACE. But then GRACE is what God does. For *the earth produces of itself*.

⁶Idea and questions based on the *Serendipity Bible for Groups*, 4th Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998) 1386.