

Many of us at one time or another planted flower seeds or vegetable seeds.

Maybe it was in school as part of a lesson or we helped Mom or Dad plant a garden. We put the seeds in the soil, nurtured them, tended them, waited for them to grow. All the while, not knowing how this process of growth happens. Just knowing that somehow, the seed we plant secretly and mysteriously grows.

We hear two of Jesus' parables today. Both parables use seeds, something familiar, to teach about the kingdom of God, something not so familiar. The first of the two parables reminds us that the growth of the seed, the kingdom of God, is quite mysterious and beyond our understanding. Jesus says that "the kingdom of God is as if someone scatters seed on the ground and the seed sprouts and grows" but he doesn't know how. He only knows that it does. (Feasting p 143; The Interpreters Bible, p 704).

The Parable of the mustard seed, goes on to show the astonishing contrast between the small beginning and the great result. Jesus tells us that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which though the smallest of all seeds on earth,

grows to become the greatest of shrubs. We don't know how the mustard seed grows, only that it does.

Jesus loves to teach in parables. The word "parable" can mean "comparison" or "analogy." Most of Jesus' parables are story parables, a distinctively Jewish form. (p 1692, Cultural Backgrounds Bible) This teaching method isn't commonly used in the Western world— we like to be given facts and figures to prove a certainty. But parables were entirely familiar to Jesus' audience. They were used all the time by Rabbis and appear in the Old Testament. Ezekiel and other prophets used them. (Barclay p 87) Parables can have layers of meaning and various interpretations. They make us use our imaginations and make us think. Is that why some of us are uncomfortable with parables? But we can learn about ourselves from them—if we open our hearts and minds to listen, really listen. If we're willing to imagine and think outside the box.

In his first parable, known as the "automatically growing seed parable," Jesus tells us that once the seed is scattered, the earth produces of itself. "The Greeks had a word for it, *automate*, literally, "the automatic earth." (The Interpreters Bible, p

704) As one commentator points out, a farmer is secure in his trust that the earth will produce a plant from the seed, due to the nature of the earth. It's what the earth does. He knows he has nothing to do with the process of the seed sprouting. But he's sure it will sprout. Automatically.

The farmer's security is compared in the parable to the sower of the seed. The sower is a human being—yes, God needs us to scatter the seed. The seed is the word of God. Like the farmer, the sower is sure of the growth of the seed, due to God's power, God's grace. He knows he has nothing to do with the process of the seed's growth. But he's sure it will grow. Silently and powerfully, through God's grace, the kingdom grows. (The Interpreters Bible, p 704) It is inevitable because the grace of God, that divine force, makes it so.

This message of hope and encouragement was vital for Mark's audience. Mark wrote his gospel about 30 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. This community of early Christians was in terrible straits. They were filled with fear and despair about the state of their world. They had expected the second coming of Jesus within their lifetime, and he had not yet arrived. Worse yet,

those in power were hostile to them; it was extraordinarily difficult to live a spiritual life of faith in Jesus Christ with so many political and economic forces aligned against them.

Does that ring a bell for anyone? We are also awaiting the second coming and often feel bombarded with the forces of the modern world against us.

Mark's gospel gives them assurance that the kingdom of God will grow, they are not to lose heart. They are to stay on the path that Jesus set out for them; God's grace, that Divine force, is sufficient. Looking back these centuries later, we see the truth of that assurance. That small rag-tag bunch of Jesus' followers has grown into a world-wide Jesus movement! Yes, God's grace, that Divine force, is indeed sufficient. For Mark's community and for us.

The second parable, that of the mustard seed, assures us that not only is it inevitable that the kingdom of God will grow, the size of its growth is, as the kids would say, humongous! That tiny mustard seed grows into a bush so large and lush that the birds nest in its branches. The reference to birds making nests in its

shade is the gathering of Gentiles, the multitudes of nations, into the Kingdom of God. (Feasting, p 141)

The mustard bush, by the way, is ironically considered by many farmers to be an annoying weed. Mustard takes over everything, and it's impossible to be rooted out once it's sprouted. What a superb image for the Kingdom of God and our sometimes resistance to it. I don't know about you, but I can get really annoyed with Jesus' teachings. Some days, I don't want to love my neighbor as myself. I'd rather cut him off in traffic. Yes, I need to keep coming to Church and hearing God's message!

One of God's messages today is that a seed was and is valuable. Images in both the Old and New Testaments speak to this. In the Book of Genesis, there was delight in the lushness of the Garden of Eden as God created "seed-bearing plants and trees that bear fruit with seed in it." (Gn 1:11-12) Later, entire economic systems were formed around the value of seed as food. The Old Testament records that during Egypt's famine, Joseph purchased land of desperate Egyptians in exchange for seed. (Gn 47:19) The seed, both planted and reserved as food,

sustained the Egyptians. Seed was used as a measure of weights and so was of value. "In both its presence and its absence, seed is an image of prosperity."

*(Dictionary of Biblical Imagery, p 770-771)*

The New Testament also is filled with imagery of seed. God's word is likened to a seed. Peter and John describe freedom from sin as growing from a new type of seed: "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God." (1 Pet 1:23) Seeds are life-giving. They have a vital and dynamic power.

Let's consider ourselves as seeds. Just as seeds are of extraordinary value and are life-giving, so are we. Just as seeds are vital and dynamic, so are we. What God wants of us is to accept and believe in our value. We are valuable because God has filled us with his life and love. What God wants of us is to be life-giving to others, to share his dynamic love with others.

Perhaps sharing of ourselves with others, scattering the seeds of God's love, is what the kingdom of God is all about.

The word, “kingdom” can be difficult to hear. For many of us, it brings images of earthly kingdoms, sometimes violent and repressive. One author and theologian, Megan McKenna, suggests concentrating on the relationships that are primary within the word and think of it as ‘kin-dom’. K I N – dom. That’s a bit more expressive of what Jesus is talking about—relationships, changed relationships with God, with ourselves and kinship with others. (*On Your Mark*, Megan McKenna, p 24) Do we ever see friends or strangers as kin? The person sitting next to you, behind you, in front of you as kin? Think about it.

St. Mark’s is embarking on a Summer of Conversations. Last week, Father Christopher commissioned a group to go forth and intentionally engage in individual conversations with other parishioners. You don’t have to be commissioned, by the way, to initiate an intentional conversation. All are welcome to do so!

It’s an opportunity for us at St. Mark’s to deepen relationships through one-on-one conversations, to spread the seeds of God’s love within our community; to

nourish and strengthen our community and to share that love with others outside of St. Marks. These individual conversations are, as Father Christopher would say, the most radical thing we can do. Through them, we intentionally listen to each other and learn from each other. It's a great risk; it requires your saying, "Yes, I am worth listening to; I want to know someone else and be known by them. I want to be in relationship."

We don't know how that strengthening of the bonds between us works. We just know that it does, through God's grace. Each conversation between two of us is a valuable piece in the growth of all of us, the sprouting of God's kin-dom.

By engaging in these conversation, we can each be like the tiny mustard seed that grows into a huge bush where the birds may nest in its shade. Yes, we all have a part in the mysterious, exciting, and inevitable growth of God's kin-dom. May we go forth relying on God's grace, that Divine force, which is, indeed, sufficient.

---

The following sources were used in writing this sermon:

Megan McKenna, *On Your Mark*, Orbis Books, 2006.

William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, revised ed., Westminster Press, 1975.

David Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, eds, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

*The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VII, Pierce & Smith, 1951.