

June 14, 2015

“Seeds, Shrubs, and an Unexpected Kingdom of God”

Sermon by Rev. Robert English



Mark 4: 26-34

He also said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.'

He also said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 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.'

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

A couple years ago I decided that I wanted to get into gardening. I was inspired watching HGTV, Home and Garden Television. I had this vision of what life would be like with this grand garden producing fresh vegetables and fruits for Allison and me. So one day off we devoted our entire day off to getting our garden planted. We made a trip to OSH for all the necessary supplies, we got out the car mats to use as knee pads for a bit of comfort (a trick I learned from my father), and we weeded and planted and mulched and watered.

At the end of the day I took a step back and looked at this garden and that grand vision of what would come to be, crept into my mind: tomato bushes overflowing with deep red tomatoes, jalapeño plants bursting forth with jalapeños for fresh salsa, bell peppers for our fajitas, and cantaloupe for those warm summer days. It was going to be glorious, a garden of abundance.

Days became weeks and weeks became months and the garden became well, not at all what we had intended. The tomatoes were overflowing to say the least, with more tomatoes than we knew what to do with and I scrambled to learn how to make homemade marinara just so they wouldn't go to waste.

It turns out we don't eat fresh salsa nearly as much as I thought we did and after you eat a ton of super spicy jalapeño you lose some of your taste buds. The bell peppers never even materialized and we had one tiny, little itty bitty cantaloupe to enjoy one warm summer afternoon as a snack.

Sometimes when you're growing things, you have to leave a little room for the unexpected. It is a spiritual discipline in releasing control.

It's been a few years since we tried our hand at gardening and yet this last spring I noticed this tiny plant starting to pop up, a plant that didn't quite look like a weed. So we let it grow, and grow and sure enough what emerged was this tiny little tomato plant, the remnant of the tomato forest we had a few years back. All along, these past few years, as we slept and woke, and slept and woke, and went about the day to day of our existence, **this quiet, invisible life giving force was at work in our backyard, bringing about new life and new possibilities.**

In today's scripture Jesus presents us with two parables about the nature of the kingdom of God. Parables are short stories which impart some deep spiritual truth. They are layered with meaning and insight wrapped upon itself. So you can actually read the same parable over time and it can reveal new deep and wondrous insights. Parables themselves are like the kingdom of God in that way, they meet us where we are at and pull us out of ourselves, so that for just one moment we can transcend our narrow view of the world and see things through the lens of Jesus, you can see God's kingdom emerging in your midst.

Both of these parables use the imagery of seeds to communicate something about what God's kingdom looks like. Some of this is lost on us as modern readers, especially if you are like me and do not have a green thumb. But, it is helpful to keep in mind that Jesus was talking to people who lived on the land for the most part and they were far more familiar with these agricultural processes than many of us.

I wanted to spend just a little time unpacking the parable of the mustard seed. When I was growing up in the church I heard sermons and Sunday school lessons that taught that the spiritual truth imparted here is that this small seed, which equals the word of God, is able to grow and blossom into this large tree of faith in our hearts. This is all well and good and definitely spoke to me as a boy, when I was this small little being, longing to grow into a teenager and eventually into an adult.

But if we dig a little deeper, pull back yet another layer of the text perhaps, Jesus is trying to convey both this and something else entirely with the parable. Mustard is a strange plant to choose when talking about the kingdom of God. It does come from this tiny seed, but as it grows it become this huge, kind of ugly shrub.

The greatest of all shrubs, but a shrub is still a shrub, right?

And there are some sources¹ that point out that during Jesus' time there were practices that instructed people to grow their mustard shrubs in a separate garden plot all together because it tends to be an invasive plant; it just kind of takes over everything.

So perhaps, just maybe; Jesus is being a bit ironic and funny here. Maybe he is using this plant that people know of as kind of annoying, unruly and difficult to tame, to describe what it is like to be a part of God's kingdom.

¹ I discovered multiple sources for this information including *Jesus for President*, by Shane Claiborne that I drew from

Maybe he is giving us a vision of the Kingdom of God that defies all our conventions.

Another thing to keep in mind about mustard is that the seed itself has some real potency... but it is only released when it's crushed. It's only after the seed is grounded down that you can discover its true power.

Maybe Jesus is asking us to suspend everything that we think we know about the kingdom of God and to leave some room for the unexpected, the unruly, invasive love of God to seep into our lives.

Maybe he is saying that vision you have for your garden, for your life, your family, your neighborhood, that measure of control that you are trying so desperately to hang onto, maybe he's saying that the kingdom of God is beyond your control and my control but never beyond God's control.

It's like he's trying to convey to us there is this quiet force at work constantly that undergirds everything in the universe and is always drawing us forth into new life and new possibilities. ...that God's kingdom is infectious and invasive, something that you can't shake off or get rid of, an impulse and orientation, of unbounded love and overwhelming grace that forever overtakes your world view and invades and conquers your heart. And maybe the true power in the world is not found in huge redwoods or sequoias, but in shrubs that come from tiny seeds that when crushed you unleash their true potency.

I heard a man named Jim relay a story once of spending some time with a group of nuns who lived in an impoverished neighborhood in Dallas Texas. The nuns lived a life of prayer, service and witness. They woke up every day before most of us would ever dare to wake up, and they prayed for their neighborhood. They were out in their community serving as most people were just starting their day. They cleaned up the streets, served meals, tutored children, and they welcomed people with radical hospitality. This community embodied this slow, ongoing life-giving force for their neighborhood.

Jim said each and every one of them conveyed to him that they saw the face of the living Christ in everyone they met and they longed to serve him in any way they could. He said it was funny being out with them because they stood out in many different ways. First, they all wore their habit, you know, their nun attire, but he also said they stood out because they were with him. See, Jim is a huge guy, like 6'4" 275 and all of these nuns were tiny.

As he reflected on his time with them he told us that what he really learned was just how amazing God's power is, the strength that comes in perceived weakness, the kingdom made manifest through the work of these tiny nuns going about the daily business of giving their lives away for Christ.

Perhaps the kingdom of God is where you learn to grow smaller and smaller.

Now as Wesleyan Christians we believe that the kingdom of God is both in our midst and coming into being. We believe that the kingdom is located within us and around us, it is found in our hearts and in our neighborhoods.

I have to tell you I think that Jesus was onto something when he described the kingdom of God as an invasive, infectious mustard shrub, because sometimes that's exactly what it feels like within our hearts. Have you ever had that thing that you have felt compelled to do that just lodges itself in your chest? Right in here?

That feeling that you can't let go of, and usually it's that feeling that we need to put our self on the back burner long enough to care for someone else's need.

Perhaps it's that person you always see on your walks around your neighborhood whose asking for spare change and you walk past them and walk past them and walk past them but something overcomes you and your heart says, stop, say hello, ask for their name, let them know that I hope to see them tomorrow.

Or it's that moment when your heart of ice is finally melted at work with that co-worker who annoys you to no end, and instead of dismissing their idea with a snarky comment in your head, like you normally do, you embrace that idea with zest and zeal and you start to think maybe they are of sacred worth too.

Perhaps it's embracing that call you received after you heard that story that made you weep and left you with that feeling of righteous anger, that one inside you that says this just isn't right, God doesn't want this for our world. There is a better way forward, I have to do something about this.

And so you go and you give, you empty yourself out among the broken and the weak because you are broken and you are weak, you are a tiny seed being crushed, and ground up so that the full power of God's love can be unleashed in you and through you.

And so, may we be annoying, unruly shrubs of grace for our world, may we be tiny, little seeds crushed and ground up so that God's power might be unleashed, and may we never, ever, ever, underestimate our God, who is always bringing life in new and unexpected ways. Amen.