

St. PAUL'S CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
Mark 4:26-34, June 17, 2018
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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Thy Sight, Oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

At the end of my driveway back in Connecticut there was a plant that kept growing and growing. It got covered by road sand and salt every winter. I would mow it down in its early stages of growth in the spring. The deer wouldn't even nibble on it even though they stripped all the day lilies around it. I even took out my saw to cut it down right to the ground when it got so big that I could barely see cars, bikes, and skateboards coming down the street. And even that didn't last - today it's just as big and strong and still doesn't quit – thing is, it's a weed – a very hardy weed.

If you have a garden, you know that we all have plants that seem to suddenly explode there - lush, healthy looking plants that are but weeds. Choking out the little rose bush or the tomato plant. As we struggle to keep our gardens flourishing, we come to look on those weeds as real pests and we spend hours thinning them out or at least trying to keep ahead of them.

Jesus says, the Kingdom of God is like the planting of a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds. And yet, when it is planted and germinates, it grows and grows to become a weed, about a foot high, a mighty bush. A mustard plant - not a mighty oak, one of the Cedars of Lebanon, or the majestic redwood. A weed.

A weed - that's not very impressive. "Jesus," the disciples say, "we don't like being compared to a weed." Jesus reminds us that God is not impressed by the world's standards of measurement, though. The world,

then and even now, regards the Jesus movement as small, insignificant, powerless - yet in such seemingly small ways, the world is being transformed. Then and now. Transformed, movement toward God's kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven.

The Kingdom of God is like a weed. Tiny seeds germinate, take root, sprout up here and there, everywhere. Like crabgrass - you can't overcome it, no matter how hard you try. And, you know, I get comfort and a great deal of hope from that. God knows, the news of today can make us feel so powerless and hopeless at times. But the seeds are planted - they will grow. The Kingdom of God is greater and more powerful than any human kingdom. And God is at work to bring in the kingdom, from small beginnings - from seemingly insignificant events, through those people who seem to be on the outside. God is at work bringing in the Kingdom where we really don't expect it.

Think back to David: that unknown, unvalued, shepherd boy who ends up established as King, as the shepherd of Israel. The spirit comes on him. David is empowered. Young, marginalized David - no credentials, no social claim. King David, ancestor of Jesus Christ. Unexpected. Unheard of. Like the weed that shelters the bird nesting on the ground. Through David and even the mustard seed - in small and more importantly, unexpected ways, the world is transformed.

And you know, the same thing can and does happen with us. When have you and I been like the mustard seed? When have you and I participated in seemingly small and insignificant events that can and have transformed the world? Or at least a part of the world where we live? When have you and I come from the margins and like the one scattering seed on the ground - we work at preaching and teaching, at supporting each other, at

serving those in need, and at creating a more just social order? Friends, these days that's so in front of us – creating a more just social order! But the good news is that the Kingdom is taking root, no matter how small it seems. Growth and change occur while we sleep, we know not how.

Have you ever had someone thank you for something you've completely forgotten? A friend of yours, or even more likely, an acquaintance, tells you about a chance remark of yours that made a real difference to her? Perhaps it was when she was facing some kind of a family crisis, or she'd lost her job, and you ran into her somewhere and said something you've long forgotten. But she hasn't. It turns out the long forgotten chance remark you made gave just the right word of comfort, and she has treasured it for years, and has finally found the moment to tell you so.

You never had the slightest idea, of course, not until you heard about it years later. But that tiny action of yours turned out to have made a big difference in someone else's world.

If this has happened to you, you might have been a little embarrassed that you couldn't even recall what you said or did that made such a difference in someone's life. At the same time, if this has happened to you, you also know that it is a very moving experience, one that both humbles you and makes you feel grateful and wonderful. Something so small becoming something so big.

And have you ever been on the receiving end of this? Has something stuck in your mind that you heard or saw that really made a difference to you? Has someone done something that at the time seemed so small but was lifechanging? A little remark, a little deed, that opened the door to hope, to

renewal of faith, to inspiration to keep going, to a direction you'd never even thought of?

It's like a grain of mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs. It's like a man who took and sowed seed in his field, and the earth produced of itself, first the grain and then the ear and then the full blade in the ear.

Both of these parables from the gospel this morning make their point with the image of seed - one about the contrast between the insignificant act of sowing seed and the significance of the resulting process of growth. The other about the contrast of a gigantic shrub and the tiny seed that produced it. Both of them teach us that in the Kingdom, more comes out than we thought we put in. More happens than what we made happen.

The seed of the Kingdom, which produces far beyond expectations, is not so much the great, religious looking deeds people may do once or twice in their lives. The real seed of the Kingdom is the mustard seed: the tiniest words, the most inefficient pieces of witness, the little actions of every day. Small acts of kindness. Small ways we reach out and bring the gift of hope, of encouragement. And so many times we don't even know what we did!

You could almost say that from the point of view of the Kingdom, whatever we do sows a seed for God or against God. The choices we all make: when we decide to greet a visitor in church, to invite someone to worship, to ask a friend may I pray with you? The actions we take: when you return the extra change the store clerk gave you by mistake, when you speak up against racist or sexist jokes, when you volunteer at a soup kitchen. When we even simply smile at our neighbor. All these things sow a seed, both in our lives and in other lives.

Scatter seed upon the ground...and the earth produces of itself, says Jesus in this morning's lesson. The sowing of even those tiniest seeds begins a process over which we just don't have control. Oh, we can step in and wreck it by overwatering, or maybe help out a little by getting the right fertilizer in the soil. But the growth does seem to come of itself.

I think about the most gracefilled worship experiences, Sunday School classes, the most profound confirmation classes when we put aside the lectionary or the curriculum - the water, the fertilizer, if you will, and just listen and let the growth happen. It does, you know. We plant seeds of faith in our children starting with their baptism - those seeds sprout in the Child Care Room when the child recognizes the face and care of the person who holds and plays with him each Sunday. And those seeds continue to sprout as the children learn the stories, sing the songs, ask the questions. And in the confirmation classes when our youth really struggle with the great faith questions of our day - I remember one year when two of the confirmands experienced the death of a grandparent in a week - of course I put aside the curriculum for the day and we talked - I mostly listened as they talked - one after another asking questions, relating their experiences when a family member died - it was truly awesome. Those seeds planted early in their Sunday School days were taking root - growth was happening before my eyes. And all any of us have done is spread the seed, spread the word. We can't always control the process, can we.

And in fact, if you try to control the result, you can ruin the process. Children will sometimes dig up seeds to see if they are sprouting yet and we know what happens then. If you give someone a piece of advice and then call them every three days to ask if they are following it yet, you'll kill the growth. Ultimately, we have to trust the seeds that are sown in our lives,

just as we trust the seeds we may sow for others. We have to trust the Word of God to grow in our hearts, the sacraments to have their mysterious effect on us, the daily efforts of following Christ to change us little by little.

God invites us in this morning's gospel to learn how to let seeds grow, both in our lives and in the lives of those around us, without trying to control the process. In fact, maybe a further invitation is to live without even fretting all that much about whether we are sowing enough seed, or the right kind, or in the right place. As God's children, we can live our lives, not worrying over progress and control and results, but simply referring all those concerns to God, the master gardener. We make it our aim to please God, says St. Paul. This has all kinds of results, none of which we're guaranteed to see.

One will be the effect on other people, the positive seeds we will be privileged to sow from time to time. We won't always know about these but they may turn out to have been very great.

And the other result that will come from living our lives as in God's sight will be the effect on ourselves, as we mature in faith. The seeds that have been sown in our own lives will keep growing too.

We may or may not perceive that growth; we may or may not know what we have done for others. But we will know that we are making it our aim to please God in the little things. When we do that, the Kingdom, like the seeds, takes care of itself. Let us all bear fruit. We can do this, with God's help! So may it be.

Amen.