

Pass the Mustard
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Mark 4:26-32

Jacqueline and I have lived in our home for three years. It's the first place we've ever lived where the front yard was primarily full of creeper grass. The former owners told us that this "Lazy Man's" grass was perfect, because when it gets really hot in the summer, it's got strong enough roots not to burn up. And as it grows longer, it creeps out, rather than shooting up. That means it won't be horribly unkempt if we miss a Saturday lawn mowing or two. What they didn't tell us is that it's the first grass to turn brown in the fall, and the last to turn green in the spring.

And about the middle of April every year, we notice that our neighbors' yards look healthy and green, and ours looks like it missed the memo that that a new season has arrived. And admittedly, we failed to fertilize, or put down preventatives, or lift one finger to help it along. (Please don't tell our homeowners association!). But wouldn't you know it, along came June, and our grass is green, and lush, and thick and high, and not as lazy as we'd like for it to be.

And I'm not a farmer, but I sure can relate to our first parable, because somehow, some way, grass seeds germinate, and they gauge the proper temperature, and they sprout in the form of strong, green blades. And I don't have a sickle, but I do have a mower, and there is a harvest of green grass, ready for somersaults, and a giggling toddler, and all kinds of summer fun. And even though I never saw that grass growing, working, preparing for a new season – it was!!! And Jesus tells us that God's kingdom is working in the same way. It may not feel so pronounced, you may not even notice it happening, but the harvest is coming.

And we hear about mustard seeds, too. Remember this isn't a scientific parable, so there's a bit of room for exaggeration. The mustard seed may not be the smallest of all seeds, but it's pretty tiny, and if it was much smaller, you'd need a microscope to examine it. And yes, arborists and Discovery Channel watchers, you would be hard pressed to find a mustard tree taller than six feet. And it's really a bush or shrub, not a tree. And while a bird could rest in its branches, its branches would not be large enough for nesting. But don't get so bogged down in details!

Jesus is describing something really, really tiny, that is going to grow in an enormous way. And remember this is the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. And he's saying, "The world that I'm seeking to bring about right now may appear kind of small, but I promise you, it's something that's taking root, and it's gonna grow exponentially."

Two parables. Two key kingdom insights. The kingdom is at work, even if you don't see it. And it's a kingdom that's going to keep growing.

The last two verses of our lection tell us that Jesus uses his parables in a kind of mysterious, coded way. He tells large audiences about God's kingdom in a veiled way, but explains it in more detail to the disciples. I don't really agree with the author of Mark here. I don't think Jesus is being intentionally vague. I just think you have to have enough conversations with Jesus to begin to understand the way he thinks. And it just so happened that the disciples had the luxury of picking his brain 24/7.

But I will concede that you've got to work with parables on a consistent basis to begin to understand their deeper meanings. While at Wake Forest, the dean of our divinity school, Gail O'Day, offered a deeper reflection on the mustard seed – she even suggested this was a really subversive parable.

“Have you ever seen a mustard plant?” she asked us. “Or have you ever had to maintain one? Well, they're not a lot of fun. Because, they engrain themselves in everything. If left unchecked, they can get into everything else in the garden. They spread. And they tangle. And they take up residence with your other plants.”

And when I heard her say this, I wasn't half-surprised. Because while I haven't had a mustard plant, I've consumed lots of mustard. I can't think of one sandwich I've ever had with mustard that didn't get all over me, my clothes, and everything I touched!!! All it takes is the smallest dollop. It only stands to reason that the plant would behave the same way!!!

Dean O'Day, like other scholars, also notes the royal significance of the image of birds nesting. Prophets foretold that God would plant a mighty cedar on Israel's highest hill, and the birds, that is the nations of the world, would find respite in its branches.

And I wonder how such a tale must have been received in the time of Jesus. Here they were, in the midst of Roman occupation, hoping for a Messiah in the form of David, to become a mighty cedar, who would rule above them in majesty and glory. And Jesus is talking about a kingdom that's gonna grow like a mustard plant? And that means God's not gonna be something that dwells over people, but rather something that dwells in their midst. And not only in their midst, but really, all up in their business. Around them. Beside them. Amongst them. In the thick of it. Here and now.

At the end of her lecture, Dean O'Day gave all of her students a packet of mustard seeds. She told us that all of those seeds represented our ideas, and our hopes, and that when planted, she believed they would help bring about God's kingdom, by growing and becoming entwined in the world with all the persistence and peskiness of a mustard plant.

And she's right. Her students, not to mention the thousands of parishioners they now serve, are provoked into active love by engaging the scriptures, and applying biblical insight to their surroundings. Some pursue environmental justice, others justice for the immigrant, or the marginalized, or the oppressed. They engage neighbors who are homeless, or lost, or depressed, or facing deportation, or struggling to find a job, or working through grief, or wrestling with illness, or pondering the deepest theological questions. And somehow, the cause, whether micro or macro, tells them that this person, or this thing, or this idea is too vital to be ignored. God's kingdom – that is the tangible, pronounced, big ball of divine love – will become glimpsed with shelter for the night, or bread broken and shared, or empathy expressed, or kindness shown, or the simple acknowledgement of neighbor.

Today, Jesus tells us that despite our prep work, God will do the heavy lifting. And that though it may all seem tiny now, it's growing. For when we plant our mustard seeds, we can expect blades of green, creeping grass. In June, when we thought it'd never happen! And we can expect a Kingdom that will grow. Not over us. But in our midst. And tell us to join in, too!

Because the interpretation of scriptures has been a hot topic this week, and because we've explored two parables this morning, I want to close with a final thought.

The Bible is a collection of writings, edited and redacted to its final form over the course of hundreds of years. It's also a collection writings written by people who lived in specific places and times, and who sought to make sense of God in their context. And it's a collection of writings that were written in a patriarchal world.

That means that while we read many, many good things in these texts, we also read some dangerous passages that need to be handled with thoughtful consideration.

For me, the scriptures have introduced a God who has not only created the world, but also loves and values creation. And they speak overwhelmingly of the human responsibility to love both God and neighbor. And they define our neighbor in the broadest possible way – it's not just whom we love, or whom we look like, or whom we think should be our neighbor. Our neighbors are EVERY created being, all made specifically in the image of God. And we're told to love.

If one so chooses, they can certainly find a dozen or so disclaimers in the more than 2,000 pages of the Bible to take issue with my assertion. And I could point them to five times as many to defend my assertion against theirs.

But here's the thing. I don't worship an imperfect text. I read an inspired text that calls me to worship a living, breathing, loving God. And as much as I wish some days that God, and that God's kingdom sat atop of me like a cedar tree, neither one does. And as much as I wish that God's kingdom was tidy and neat and full of decimal point answers, it isn't.

God sits beside me, in my midst, entwined in me like a mustard plant. And God's kingdom is messy, and overgrown, and scattered, and pretty wonderful, too. And the spirit that filled Jesus, and fills you and me too, provokes us, pesters us, challenges us to remove all the disclaimers we place on that word neighbor. And Jesus tells us that when we stand up for our neighbors in a world that tries to shut them out, God's kingdom is growing. We may not see it. And may not be able to explain how it manifests itself. And it may not look like it's all that significant right now. But it matters. And it's coming. You'll see!!!

The parables, and all the other stories, are not weapons of authority to be thrown about like stinging darts. And they are not the hammer of oppression meant to flatten all those who would dare challenge the injustices of man. And they are not secret codes meant to wall off non-believers.

They are an invitation to all who would seek them, whether willingly, reluctantly, or any other state. And they are tools to help discover, dream, and build the kind of world, where the orphan, and the widow, and the stranger, especially the stranger, and attorney generals, and even the Apostle Paul, know the deepest and fullest love and grace of God. And where they work beyond all measure to ensure that such love and grace are extended to their neighbors as well. I think you call that kingdom living.

So friends, let's revel in the joyful mystery of germinating seeds. And let's gobble up all the mustard we can. And let's listen, really listen, to hear the power of transformative stories. And let's invite our neighbors, all of them, to join us. And let's do it today.

Amen.