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2 Corinthians 5:6-17

Mark 4:26-34

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WHAT'S GROWING?

Jesus was a great storyteller. His stories were short and memorable. They were called parables, from the Greek *para*, meaning ‘equivalent to,’ and *bolé*, meaning ‘throwing.’ He would toss out his stories to the crowds to allow them to see certain comparisons he was making. He would use ordinary things and events the people knew about, describing them in such a way that they could grow in their understanding of the ways of the reign of God. He did not use catechisms for teaching purposes. He did not deliver creeds to give a comprehensive theological witness. Those may have their place, but Jesus generally taught through stories, and through them, he helped his listeners expand their thinking about and their faith in God and God’s ways. Jesus would captivate with these stories and liberate through these stories. They did not explain God’s reign, but they described God’s reign in accessible ways for his audiences. They went beyond being descriptive because they were also transformative, showing that how we have seen things in the past can be reframed to offer a new vision of what could be. Part of the brilliance of these parables were the surprises that popped up in the stories that would show differences between our view of the world as compared with the possibilities that the reign of God offered.

The people thought of God as big and powerful, which God is. And yet none of Jesus’ stories about the ways of God are about something like a massive fortress. You might find a comparison like that in the psalms – Martin Luther found one in Psalm 46 and wrote the hymn, “A Mighty Fortress is our God.” But Jesus’ stories don’t focus on God’s size and power in that way. The people thought that God’s power could be proclaimed loudly with seventy-six shofars or ram’s horns blasting out to lead a big parade, but Jesus’ stories frequently indicated that God works quietly, when few are noticing. The parables Jesus told were like little

seeds, planted in the people's minds, that would grow over time into something full of life that would enable them to be full of life.

It is rather interesting then that the first parables that we hear Jesus tell in the Gospel of Mark are about seeds that are planted and that grow quietly. We hear of God bringing life and liveliness and fruitfulness through something as small as a tiny seed. And when it grows into its fullness, it is like a stalk of grain or a large shrub. It is the surprises in Jesus' stories that keep us going back to them, to continue our search for the depths of their meaning.

I must tell you that I approach Jesus' parables with humility because I know that my interpretation of these stories has taken different forms at various points in my life. The meaning that can come through them might be quite different to someone who has just graduated from high school or college, or to someone who has recently suffered a great loss, or to a faith community looking for what might be next. But in the parables of the growing seed and of the mustard seed, we come to understand that God can see beyond what may have humble outward appearances to what, by God's grace, could have great potential. Taking these stories to heart, we move closer to walking by faith instead of by sight.

The reign of God in our midst starts like the smallest seed, a mustard seed, so it may not be very impressive. What's a single congregation or a small denomination or those who follow Jesus going to do to address the massive moral and financial poverty around us? The parable says the seed grows up to be the greatest of shrubs. We may want it to grow into an orchard instead or a field of flowers or a strong massive tree. But we are also the ones who want forbidden fruit, golden calves, our father's inheritance, and a Savior who doesn't have to suffer, so perhaps our judgment may not be as great as the greatest of all shrubs.

The mustard plant grows, but it does not grow so high that it may topple and fall. It remains a bit lowly, like a royal figure who enters a city humble and riding on a donkey, who comes not to be served but to serve. The reign of God is of the type that it stoops to wash feet, it kneels by wounded strangers on the side of the road. It is lifted up, not on the shoulders of servants, but on a cross where all creation is

reconciled to God. This shrub is big enough for birds of every kind to find a home, regardless of their religious or non-religious background, their racial identity, their gender identity or sexual orientation, their economic status, and their personality type. Birds of every feather can flock together because this shrub, God's reign, is big enough. It grows in ways we cannot see and cannot know, until it breaks forth from the ground and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, big enough for people to come from east and west and north and south, from left and right, from rural and urban areas to sit at table together.

When we take this parable to heart, we will no longer be quick to dismiss something or someone we consider to be small and insignificant. We will not give up on ourselves, on others, on the church, or even on our dystopian world just because we see many signs of brokenness. Rather, we will believe in God's possibilities even if the evidence is as tiny as a mustard seed. To believe this is to receive the gift of a new perspective. Believing this, we will have confidence to do great things in God's name as we offer ourselves to the One who has planted in us even tiny seeds of love, generosity, justice, and kindness.

It's Father's Day. I was reminded of a children's song written by David Mallett years ago called "The Garden Song" that has been sung by a variety of artists and non-artists. I can imagine God singing it while serving as that Master Gardener:

Inch by inch, row by row
Gonna make this garden grow
All it takes is a rake and a hoe
And a piece of fertile ground.

Inch by inch, row by row
Someone bless these seeds I sow
Someone warm them from below
Till the rain comes tumblin' down. ¹

We know that Someone who sows and blesses the seeds, who warms them with a light from above and pours out the waters that give the potential for growth. We know of that Someone because of stories we have heard from a great storyteller,

one who not only tells stories that are interesting, but also stories that are true. The stories are about the reign of God – but they are also about us, because God’s reign has identified us as a part of God’s garden. And God says, or sings, “I’m gonna make this garden grow.” Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ <https://genius.com/David-mallett-garden-song-lyrics>