

“SEEDS AND KINGDOMS”

Mark 4:26-32

Dr. Charles D. Yoost, Senior Pastor

Some people just seem to have a knack for gardening and getting things to grow. My mother has houseplants that started out small, but have grown and bloomed and flourished for years. I have to replace the plants in my office every now and then. They just don't seem to grow that well for me. My father-in-law was a person who not only had a green thumb, but he was also extremely proud of the size and abundance of his produce. For example, one year he was extremely pleased with the large strawberries that he had grown behind his home. According to him, when someone asked him for a quart of strawberries, he replied, "I'm not going to cut one of my strawberries in half for anybody!" One afternoon I saw him going to the garden with a step ladder over his shoulder. "What's going on?" I asked. "I'm going out to check my tomato plants!" he replied. My son and his wife planted a peach tree when they moved into their new home in Charlotte. "How is the peach tree doing," Barb asked when we were on the phone with them the other day. "Great," they replied. "We've already picked 108 peaches!" Did he inherit his grandfather's touch for growing things, or his grandfather's salesmanship technique, or both?

The *Plain Dealer* noted recently that there is not one working farm left in Cuyahoga County. Yet there is now a proposal to plant crops on vacant properties in the city of Cleveland, and we are being encouraged to grow and to purchase produce locally. The goal is to reduce the amount of energy being used by not having to transport fruits and vegetables from far away places. Community gardens are becoming more and more popular. Farmers' Markets provide needed income for the growers, as well as a source of fresh and healthy produce for those of us who live in urban areas. It seems that more and more people are getting into the act. I know several apartment dwellers who have tomato plants on their patios. They may not need a stepladder to pick the ripe tomatoes, but they are able to raise quite a nice crop, even six or seven floors off the ground.

Jesus told some stories about gardeners and farmers and growing crops. He used the image of planting and gardening to illustrate the miracle of growth. Yes, I said miracle. For all our efforts, with watering and adding fertilizer and weeding and all the rest, not one of us can make a plant grow. What happens when the seed goes into the ground is a mystery, known only to God.

When I was a District Superintendent, the area where my churches were located was largely a rural area. As I would drive to the churches I supervised for meetings or to preach, I would see farm after farm after farm. I found many of the farmers to be people of profound faith, for they were constantly being reminded that for all their efforts at cultivating the soil,

planting the crops at the right time, protecting them where possible from the sun in the summer and the frost in the fall, the growth of their crops and the eventual harvest was beyond their control. In the final analysis, they had to trust God for the outcome. Most of their fields were too vast and their resources too limited to water their crops or provide a lot in the way of fertilizer. They were pretty much dependent upon the rain and the sun and the gentle breezes for the success of their efforts. I repeat, most of them exhibited a quiet, rock-like faith in Almighty God.

In today's Lectionary reading from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus tells two parables about growth. In the first, someone scatters the seed, and lo and behold, it grows. When my wife was sick, our across the street neighbor brought over some fresh dill from her garden behind their home. When I thanked her, she said, "No big deal. With dill you just throw it on the ground, and it grows." She makes it sound so easy. I suspect there's a little more to it than that.

In rural areas, there is a well-known saying in the late summer, "Make sure you lock your car doors when you go into church." Now it's not that there's unusual risk while people are in worship, you understand. It's just that when you come out of worship in rural areas, if you have unwittingly left your car unlocked, you will find a bag with a zucchini or two in the front seat! There's nothing that grows more abundantly than zucchini!

In the second parable, someone plants a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds. But when it grows, it becomes a plant large enough for birds to make their nests on its branches and in its shade. Another example of the miracle of growth.

Now what does all this have to do with the Christian life? Jesus would say, "Everything!" Jesus is intent on telling the people about the Kingdom of God, and these parables about growth are one of his prime illustrations. I have used this phrase "kingdom of God" several times. It is a "churchy" phrase that may not mean much to you. We who live in the United States are not used to thinking about "kingdoms." We have president, not a king. Yet we all know that a king or a queen is a ruler, who has a lot of power. When we come to faith, we give God the ultimate power and authority over us. Of course, he has that power, whether we acknowledge it or not. Jesus teaches that recognizing that this is God's world, and acknowledging that God is in charge, is key to living the life that God intends.

We believe that God is at work in the world today establishing his kingdom, or his authority over all people and all things. Jesus came to show us what God is like. When we follow Jesus we participate with God in moving closer to that day when God will prevail in every situation and in every human life.

To be sure, evil and evil forces are powerful, and the power of evil is very real in our world today. Yet God's kingdom is able to make progress and to advance in spite of the evil forces that oppose God and God's ways. In spite of all effort to the contrary, God's influence is able to grow and flourish. That's what these parables are saying. They are meant to be a word of encouragement to the disciples and to us.

Many times our efforts seem small and insignificant. Who would imagine that a mustard seed would have the potential of becoming a significant plant? Who would believe that you could scatter some seeds, and eventually harvest a crop? But that's the message of these parables. And remember, parables are stories that make one point. The point of these parables is that **when seeds are planted, God is able to do great things; God is able to cause magnificent growth!**

For over twenty years my wife and I spent a week every summer as counselors at Lakeside Institute, a summer camp experience for senior high youth. We have seen lives changed through that Institute. We believe in Lakeside Institute so much that we started an endowed fund to help with its operation and expenses. The fund is in memory of Barb's parents, who attended that Institute as youth, and then were counselors there themselves.

One summer we were recruiting kids to go to camp, as we try to do every summer, because we believe so strongly in the church camping experience (Did I already say that?). A young man who was then fifteen years old came into my office. I can still see him standing there. I remember thinking to myself that he had grown a foot that summer, and was now as tall as I was. I asked him if he was signed up for camp. He said he would love to go, but his parents didn't have the money. I said I'd see what I could do.

Now in that church we didn't have a camp fund. I was too timid in those days to ask parishioners for money. (That's not true anymore, as some of you know!) I was still thinking about this young man at supper that night and told my wife his story. "I think we should pay his way to camp," she said. I didn't say anything, but I was hesitant. Now you need to know that in our relationship, I am the more frugal one. I am almost always hesitant. I was thinking about the fact that we had recently had some unexpected car expenses, some dental work that had not been covered by insurance, and the list went on. While I was thinking about all this, and coming up with a pretty good rationale why we couldn't manage any extra expense, she repeated, "Let's you and me pay his way to camp." "All of it?" I asked. "Yes," she said. "We can do it."

My wife wrote the check, and the young man went with us to camp. Well, to make a long story short, he had the time of his life that week. He played basketball, he ate ice cream, he participated in waterfront activities on Lake Erie, he had a different girlfriend every day that week. And on the last night of camp, when we had our communion service, he felt God's claim upon his heart and shared with me the next week that he felt God was calling him to be a pastor. He finished high school, went to Mount Union College, and then to Duke University to the Divinity School. Today he is a pastor in North Carolina, doing wonderfully effective ministry. **And it all started when one woman planted a seed, that God caused to flourish and grow.**

There is a tradition in the East Ohio Conference that the Dean of the Cabinet give an address to the delegates. Now, again, to explain the "churchy" language: The District Superintendents and the Bishop comprise the Cabinet, which makes the decisions on where the pastors will be appointed to serve. After six years serving in that role, as Dean of the Cabinet, I was asked to reflect and to bring a message of inspiration to all the pastors and lay people of our Conference. Now preaching to preachers and lay leaders is an intimidating experience. I have just returned from Grand Rapids, where I preached to the preachers and lay members of the West Michigan Annual Conference. It was challenging, not because I was in Michigan, but because I was preaching to pastors who preach every week, and to lay people who hear a lot of sermons! It was eleven years ago I gave that Cabinet address. Last year at Conference, David Rittgers, who is our new church start pastor at Orchard Park, addressed the Conference asking for our support. In his talk, he said that he was a youth delegate at the Conference where he heard Charlie Yoost talk about the sick man whose friends were so intent on getting him to Jesus that they took the roof off the building and lowered the man to the place where Jesus was healing people. In that sermon, I challenged the Conference to take the roof off our churches, if that's what it takes to get people to Jesus. Now I didn't know David then. I didn't know he was

sitting in that audience. But his life was changed by that sermon. Rev. Dan has said more than once that his life was changed, too. I didn't know him back then and he didn't know me. But my sermon changed his life. That, my friends, is a mystery. I don't know how it happens. But sometimes God is able to take the seeds we plant and use them. From tiny mustard seeds, plants are able to grow! Praise God!

Well, the obvious point is that when seeds are planted, God is able to do great things. The challenge to you and to me is to **plant more seeds**. What do we value here at Church of the Saviour? The things that we plant will grow. God will see to that. Do we want our children to have faith? Plant the seeds of Bible reading and prayer. Bring them, note I didn't say send them, but bring them to Sunday school. Bring them to Vacation Bible School. See that they get to camp. Buy stock in their mission work trip. Do we want the church to grow? Invite your neighbors, friends, relative and co-workers to come with you. Plant some seeds. Do you want a better world for your children and grandchildren? Invest yourselves in the ministries of our church that will help make this world a better place. Plant more seeds! Plant more seeds!

God is calling us to invest ourselves, to invest our lives, to invest our resources in the kingdom of God. We can't control the outcome. That's up to God. But we can plant some seeds. In fact, that's our job, if I read the New Testament right. Let each of us plant some seeds! Plant some seeds for the sake of the Kingdom! This is the Word of the Lord.