

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13  
Psalm 20  
2 Corinthians 5:6-17  
Mark 4:26-34

Proper 6B  
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island  
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### What Is God Growing?

Last year, I grew the most beautiful, delicate, delicious French beans imaginable. Beautiful green beans are always a treat, but picked fresh out of my own garden, and barely warmed through, these beans were crisp and tender, full of fragrance and flavor, a true feast. I let some of those beans go to seed last year, and saved the seeds in my top desk drawer in a beautiful little glass bowl. All winter long, I looked at that little bowl of seeds, remembering the sweet taste of summer they promised. I planted them this spring, and every single one of them came up, and now all of them are growing like weeds.

When I was little, I remember poking bean seeds into little dixie cups full of rich, dark soil. I watered and watched, leaning over those seeds whispering “grow, grow!” Every day I would check on the seeds and finally, as if by magic, I would see the split shell of the bean seed covering a curled green stem poke its head through the top of the soil. It was thrilling – it still is. Put a seed in the soil and just like magic, it grows into something beautiful. I would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, and I do not know how. Those beautiful black seeds I looked at all through the winter, once planted, seemed a miracle and a mystery being revealed.<sup>1</sup>

Parables are like that – mysteries being revealed. Jesus often taught in parables, using the stuff of everyday life to tell the stories of the Kingdom of Heaven where justice and mercy and love reign, and if we have ears to hear, those stories are as real today as they were in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine.

Parables work on us and in us. We feel the panic of the shepherd who has lost a precious lamb or the sacrifice of the widow as she drops her single, tiny coin into the church coffers. We smell the yeast that is leavening the bread, we feel the roughness of the patch for the new wineskin, and the worn smoothness of the old one. We know the urgency of the neighbor coming to borrow food because unexpected guests have arrived and we see the luminescence of the pearl so precious, we would give everything to have it.

When Jesus speaks in parables, he speaks into our very real lives where farmers plough, builders build, wedding guests carouse, tyrants make war, and widows stand in for oppressed people everywhere, pleading for justice from arrogant and self-obsessed judges.

To tell a parable is to put things side by side. The Kingdom of Heaven is like... like a treasure, like a pearl, like a net teeming with fish, like a mustard seed. To tell a parable is to invite the hearers

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-11-2/commentary-on-mark-426-34-5>

to ponder something they might never consider given a factual reporting. It's like the difference between reading the book and watching the movie... when we watch the movie, we see just what the director wants us to see – everything from the shoes the bad guy is wearing to the particular sorts of clouds in the sky. But when we read the book, so much more is left to the imagination and I, at least, am much more likely to see beyond what's right in front of me, to ponder at my own pace.

Parables are stories of things that happen to people, but they aren't "true" in the way accounts of Jesus' birth or death are. Parables are not interested in reporting facts, they are interested in curiosity, deep insight and meaning-making. Parables invite us in, asking us to find our place in the story, to consider our own actions and responses to the invitations God offers. They sometimes speak of ordinary things, and sometimes speak of extraordinary things, but they always provoke the question "What does this mean?"<sup>2</sup> Listening to Jesus speak in parables, brings his first century Palestinian world very close to our contemporary world, and if we have ears to hear, we hear the stories of Kingdom living, stories of what the world can be like when we come side by side with God instead of following the dominant culture.

Parables never offer pat answers. We're required to wrestle them to the ground, until they give us the blessing they contain. They don't tell us just exactly what to do or not to do, though they always point toward God, so at least we know the direction we'd be wise to take.

And this summer, in the year we read Mark's gospel, these two little parables are the only ones we will hear. That big long parable about the sower who went out to sow and scattered seeds on all manner of soil so that some of it grew and some of it didn't comes just before these two little parables that on the surface seem to be saying that the reign of God is going to grow like a weed regardless of what we do and no matter how much we know. Where's the mystery and the miracle in that? Do these two little parables of God's reign coming to pass while we're sleeping tell us just to go back to bed knowing God will do all the work anyway? I don't think so.

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. Sleep and rise, day and night, he does not know how. It's possible to hear that as Jesus saying "You don't need to do anything, you don't need to understand anything, I've got this covered."

But I don't think so. I think what he is saying is that we need to do our work and know that God is doing God's work. That we need to do our work of planting and tending and know that God will do the growing and the harvesting. We sleep, we rise, we go about the work we've been given to do and what God does with our work is sometimes a mystery – or even a miracle - in the big scheme of things.

You see, the way God works in the world, the way God uses OUR work in the world IS a mystery... we do not know how. And that's not to say we should go back to bed or ignore the work. It is to say that we are to be completely and utterly focused on the work God has given us to do, the work of scattering the seeds of the kingdom, and trusting that God will continue to do what God

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<sup>2</sup> Borg, Marcus. Conversations With Scripture: The Gospel of Mark p.38

does, in order that God's kingdom will come. We are to do the work God has given us to do and trust God with the outcome. And that can be very hard work, because we like to be in control.

We go to great lengths to be in control. Because when we're not in control, when things feel out of control, we find ourselves feeling very vulnerable, and we don't care for that. Whether it's a pandemic that continues to kill thousands of people, a country torn apart, a scary diagnosis, the loss of a job, the loss of a love, the loss of agency – we don't like being out of control. And we are. God is God and we are not. We know this, but we don't like to be reminded of it and we certainly don't like to live it.

And I think that's what Jesus is saying – God is God and we are not. God's kingdom, God's mission will go on, miraculously, mysteriously, no matter what we do or don't do. That's not the same as the church going on – that does have a great deal to do with us. But God's Kingdom will come, in God's good time and I don't need to know how or when.

There is a certain freedom in this recognition. Those tiny seeds? They are seeds of the kingdom itself, and they will blossom and grow not because we water and fuss over them. They will blossom and grow because such is the kingdom of heaven.

It's inevitable.

The earth bears fruit of itself. Inevitably.

We don't have to plant in the right places, to seed the gardens of the right people, and really, we don't even need to plant in perfect rows. Plant the seeds, Jesus tells us. Plant the seeds, even the tiniest seeds, and watch what happens.

*The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.*

The tiny mustard seed becomes a tree. Something small becomes something great. It's God's story over and over and over again. God shows up in the most unlikely places, showing us that our strength, our power, our beauty is in the lowliest of places, not because that's where we choose to take ourselves, but because that is where God chooses to abide. Think about how Jesus came among us. God chose a homeless refugee mother from an occupied country to give birth to God incarnate. We do well to pay attention to the little things...

When I was a little girl, I wore around my neck the cross my mama gave me and a little glass globe that contained one tiny, perfect mustard seed. That tiny seed was my inspiration and my reminder that my little mustard seed sized self was big enough, by the grace of God, to move mountains.

The parable of the mustard seed is a beautiful story, an important story, a story to carry in our hearts especially right now. That tiny mustard seed reminds us that every seed we plant, every act of compassion, every kindness, every burst of laughter, every tender touch, every single

offering we make to give what God has given us to give, can blossom and grow and bring God's kingdom closer and closer.

Yes God is doing the work, yes God is the author, yes God is infiltrating the world like a mustard plant, like the backyard blackberries that will take over and cannot be tamed no matter what we do. And still, it matters deeply what we do.

The parable of the seed planted and growing on its own and the parable of the mustard seed really do show us that God's kingdom cannot possibly be in decline because God is doing the growing. And we can partner with God in that mission or we can abdicate.

God's kingdom will grow simply because the seeds have been planted. I want for us to be co-creators with God, planting kingdom seeds right here, where we've been planted. Can we do that?

Will we plant those seeds?

Will we tend what we've been given?

Who is God calling us to be?

What is God calling us to do?

Will we listen for God together and discern what only St Barnabas can offer our community and the wider world?

These questions are the seeds among us. I'm looking forward to growing them together. Amen