

“Starting Out Small”

Mark 4:26-34 – June 14, 2009

INTRO: Today we hear two parables, two stories that Jesus told, using everyday common images, to help explain the workings of God in our world. Even though the images are common ones, sometimes we are still caught in the mystery of the story. We may recognize the second story we hear, about the mustard seed. But the first one may be less familiar, yet it is still a story about seeds and growth.

We’ve not had a consistently warm growing season so far. For some plants, that’s not been a problem. Lettuce is growing nicely, cherry tomatoes have blossomed, impatiens are thriving, and the roses in the church garden are just lovely. But there are other seeds and bulbs that seem to be waiting for the warm weather. Every few days I find myself standing and staring at a flower pot that’s beside my back door. A number of weeks ago, I planted caladium bulbs in that pot, favorites of my mother. She and Dad enjoyed them when they spent time in Florida. These bulbs produce big, colorful leaves, yet mine have produced nothing. I found a little green sprout appearing last week, and even stuck my fingers into the dirt, only to find the sprout wasn’t connected to one of the bulbs—it was just a weed! By now, I’d hoped something would be happening, but I’m still waiting.

Barbara Kingsolver, who is a lover of nature, was once a graduate student in ecology. She remembers “the springtime of her 25th year, when she was seriously introduced to biological field research. The project to which she was assigned involved sitting in a mesquite thicket in the southern Arizona sun, watching a species of territorial lizard do, quite frankly, almost nothing. For hours and hours, day after day. It was stultifying. When she’d signed on as a rookie animal behaviorist, she supposed she was thinking of something (more exciting, more lively), like sandhill cranes dancing. And here she had washed up instead in the land of torpid lizards. She could only be grateful that her subjects at least had *heartbeats*, and pity her other colleagues who were counting pollen grains under a microscope, or literally watching the grass grow.” (*High Tide in Tucson*)

The natural world can move in small, imperceptible ways, that can bore us to death, or try our patience because we just don’t see anything happening. We’re reminded of that reality when we hear these parables today. The parable of the seed growing without any help from the farmer, except that the farmer scatters the seed, is a parable of encouragement. It reminds us that even though we may see nothing happening, that may not necessarily be the case. God’s work continues in a sometimes hidden, mysterious way, independent of our human effort and human understanding. God is simply doing what God is doing. This “parable serves to assert hope despite what seems, at first, a rather meaningless exercise: burying the seed—putting something that is dead into the ground. The parable invites us to believe that God’s reign—the good that God will bring and does bring—will happen.” (William Loader)

The parable of the mustard seed that becomes a great shrub, with branches large enough for birds to nest in its shade, is a parable of hope—that God will accomplish great results from small beginnings. These parables “encourage us to defy hopelessness and to believe that nothing will serve the interests of those around us, our planet and ourselves, better than to allow ourselves to be part of God’s life and love in the world.” (William Loader)

These parables ask us if “we are willing to wait for God to do what God is sure to do. To build one’s life in this way—entirely upon God’s promise and no longer upon one’s own ability or inability—demands all the feeling, thinking, doing, and speaking of which we are capable.” (Eduard Schweizer)

It doesn’t mean we are not involved, it may mean though, that we pay more attention to where God may just be planting some seeds in our hearts and souls—seeds that could grow into something powerful, if we let them.

Perhaps that’s what God did in Anna and Phina Mojapelo’s lives. They looked more closely at their community around Johannesburg, South Africa, and had the seed of an idea. They saw many children who were orphaned, and made a commitment to try and find a way to care for as many orphans as they could, just because they “believe all children deserve to have a good start in life.” These sisters founded the New Jerusalem orphanage and pre-school nine years ago, in a rural stretch of land north of Johannesburg. Some of the children who live there are HIV-positive, in a land that has the world’s highest number of AIDS orphans—1.4 million. That figure “hasn’t stopped them from making this orphanage their life’s work, creating a home for those who have

nowhere else to go. Their sense of urgency, faith, and dedication is powerful, attracting a small group of like-minded supporters, all of whom are determined to make a difference. 'If you look at the size of the problem, you can feel hopeless, but we don't feel hopeless at all,' says a volunteer at the orphanage. 'When you are impacting 96 little lives, you can't feel hopeless.'"

(The Christian Science Monitor, 5/10/09)

They know they can't find beds for all of their country's orphans, but that hasn't stopped them. With God's help, they will do what they can.

Because single individuals in our congregation have had the seed of some idea for service, others of us have gotten behind those projects and supported them. I'm aware that our peanut butter and jelly sandwich project started that way. And yesterday 15 of us from 5 United Methodist Churches worked a couple hours at the Northcott Neighborhood House. Northcott is a community center that has served it's neighborhood over on 6th St., a little north of North, very well through the years, with head start, tutoring, youth activities, food and clothing banks. We didn't accomplish any huge jobs, but pulled weeds, cut branches, trimmed shrubbery, picked up trash, rolled out new sod. We helped to make the place a little more inviting, like people are caring for it.

Particularly during these economic times, some individuals have gotten the idea to actually sow seeds. Many backyards and unused lots have been turned into gardens. Schools have planted gardens to produce fresh, healthy food for their students, while at the same time helping children learn about the growing season. Some of the school administrators feared the kids would hate the food and want to go back to fast food. But it hasn't been the case. The kids are enjoying growing some of their own food. One director of nutrition services for a school district outside of Los Angeles said, "If we get them early and teach them, we've got a chance." *(The Christian Science Monitor, 5/24/09)*

In other words, if they plant the seed early in these children's lives, hopefully it will grow.

In our own personal lives, seeds may be planted that have the capacity to change us forever. A homeless man was sitting across the street from an artist's studio. The artist saw him and asked if he could paint him, as a portrait study. The man agreed. The man sat as he always sat: shoulders drooping, eyes downcast and sad. When the artist finished his painting, he invited the street person to take a look at it. "Who's that?" the fellow asked. The painting bore a slight resemblance to him, but in it there could be seen so much more: a person of dignity, with squared shoulders and bright uplifted eyes. He asked the artist, "Is that really me? I don't look like that." And the artist replied, "But that is the person I see in you." *(Emphasis, May/June, 2006)*

I'm intrigued by movies that take on the subject of religion and science. *Angels and Demons* is currently playing, and it deals with some of that age-old struggle between religion and science, faith and culture. It's not a great movie, so don't think I'm telling you to go see it. My speaking about it, doesn't give it my recommendation! But ever since I've seen it, I've thought about Robert Langdon, played by Tom Hanks, who is a Harvard symbologist. He has been sent for by the Vatican, in hopes he can help decipher some cryptic messages, to possibly save the lives of some cardinals who are being held hostage and stop the work of an awful man, who could destroy Vatican City. Langdon needs to get into the Vatican archives, to look at some Galileo documents, in hopes they will give him some clues he needs. But Langdon had requested access to those archives in the past, because he was working on a book, and his request was denied. Even now, the Vatican authorities question his motives. Langdon is asked if he believes in God. He is a skeptic, and says that he is an academic and that he believes it is beyond his mind to determine the existence of God. Well, that answer somehow satisfied the authorities and he is allowed entry. Now in case anybody is going to see this movie, I don't want to detail any more of the story, except the very end. The assistant to the pope, the Camerlengo, says to Langdon, "Thanks to God for sending you here." Langdon replies with a "thanks—I don't believe God sent me." Yet, the look on his face, at that moment, makes you think that a seed has been planted. Langdon is the skeptic, he's the academic, God may not quite fit into his scheme of things, but here's a new thought that perhaps he will mull over in his own mind and heart. Seeds can be planted and something can begin to grow, where we didn't expect it to happen.

Henry David Thoreau said: "Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders."

Perhaps we need to "recover faith in a seed." *(Barbara Kingsolver)* We need to know that whenever growth happens, we may be getting ever closer to God's intention for us and for our world.

Poet Christina Rossetti has written the following prayer that speaks of the seeds of small things:
“Give us grace, O Lord, to work while it is day, fulfilling diligently and patiently whatever duty (you) appoint to us, doing small things in the day of small things and great labors if you summon us to any.”

“Small things, tiny seeds, are the work of Christ. He did not live or heal or teach on some grand scale. He was a small man in a small country with a small reach. But because he did every small thing with grace and power, then he gave birth to a new, not just understanding of God, but life in God.” (Martha Sterne)

We too, need to be people who believe in the power of seeds and small beginnings. And we’ve got to be some of those people who are willing to both scatter a few seeds, and nurture what God might plant in us.

Margaret Mead said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed people can change the world: indeed it’s the only thing that ever has.”

There are no limits to what God can do in and through us, when one or two or three or twelve of us, guided by God’s Spirit and dedicated to Christ, work for God’s best intentions for our world.

--Sue Burwell