

**Sunday, June 13, 2021**  
**Third Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 6 (Year B)**

Mark 4.26-34

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/781653559219969>

*(Sermon begins at about 18:30)*

**“We are the Mustard Seed Plant”**

Our Gospel reading for today ends with Mark commenting that “with many such parables [Jesus] spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables” (Mk 4.33-34). Why parables? Why not just come out with the message, plain and simple? This is a bit of a mystery. Particularly when you consider what Jesus himself has to say to the Twelve about parables: “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven” (Mk 4.11-12). There is so much debate among scholars as to what Jesus meant by this statement. Why would Jesus try to intentionally keep the secrets of the kingdom of God from people? His whole mission was about revealing God to humanity, not keeping God hidden. It just doesn’t make sense. And to be honest, I have never come across a particularly satisfying explanation. Not that I’ve really looked all that hard, truth be told.

Personally, I don’t think Jesus was trying to make it unduly difficult for people to understand his parables. But like any good teacher, he knew that it would not do any good to just spoon-feed his students. He wanted them to work for it. To struggle with the material presented. Only in that way do you really come to a deeper understanding of what is being taught. Only after struggling through and solving the problem on your own do you have a greater appreciation and respect for the knowledge gained. No, I can’t believe that Jesus was trying to hide anything from his hearers. I think he wanted to be sure that those who came to him seeking to learn the secrets, the mysteries, of the kingdom of God were those who really wanted to learn. Those who were willing to do the hard work of figuring out and truly seeking to understand. Those who were willing to make the new-found insights gained from Jesus’ teachings their own.

One commentator puts it in slightly different terms, but with the same intent: “The effect of this arrangement is to draw people in (including us, as readers/hearers!): from afar, these stories seem cryptic, but as we approach them for a closer look, their treasures come into view. Just as a stained glass window is dull and lifeless when viewed from the street, but vibrantly alive with color when viewed from inside the sanctuary, Jesus’ parables are contemplative spaces, evocative puzzles, riddles that beckon us closer — closer to Jesus, that is — to hear the ‘secrets’ they simultaneously suggest and conceal.”<sup>1</sup>

Regardless of which image you use, parables, while frustrating to sit with at times, can be quite effective tools for revealing hidden or sometimes otherwise unexplainable truths. I love the description that “A parable is a kind of gymnasium, a means for us to stretch and strengthen our hearts and minds and imaginations. Parables beckon, inviting us in; they resist quick and

easy understanding; they say, in effect, *Slow down. Come closer, and listen. Let me tell you a secret...*"<sup>2</sup>

I suppose with that, I should just sit down and let you struggle through today's parables. To allow you to delve in and see what secrets today's parables whisper to you. But I wouldn't do that to you. Mainly because a part of my job is to serve as a guide as we work through such mysteries. And such mysteries are not always easy for us to unravel. The secrets the parables hold are not readily available to us. You see, we are at a disadvantage when it comes to trying to understand some of the parables. At their essence, parables are stories that use common imagery to convey a deeper truth. Part of the problem is that the imagery that Jesus used in his parables may have been common to his hearers 2,000 years ago and half a world away. But not necessarily true for 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans. We can take what is presented at face-value, but we don't have the same cultural context. Sowing seed and particularly mustard seeds just don't have a lot of meaning for us in our 21<sup>st</sup> century urban context. Other than maybe planting some seeds in a backyard garden or the fact that some recipes call for mustard seed as a seasoning. But those contexts are not going to give us what we need to get at Jesus' original intention, his original message. Messages which, by the way, are no less valuable today than they were 2,000 years ago.

Today we have one of the most well-known of Jesus' parables: the parable of the mustard seed. And while it sounds like a wonderful image for the kingdom of God, there is actually so much wrong with this imagery. For starters, most farmers in the ancient Near East considered mustard to be an invasive weed. Mustard plants spread by sending out underground shoots and can take over a garden or a field pretty quickly. As a result, farmers would generally avoid it. If present, they would do whatever it took to get rid of it. And they certainly wouldn't intentionally sow it.<sup>3</sup> Not only that, the mustard seed is not as small as Jesus makes it out to be, nor is the resulting plant as large as he makes it out to be. As one commentator notes, "It's an image packed with poetic hyperbole: there are smaller seeds than mustard, and the mature plant is hardly a 'bush' or 'shrub' with 'large branches' fit for bird nests (Mark 4:31-32). But the hyperbole itself is part of the point: Jesus is pushing us to question what's possible, to imagine bigger, bolder, more beautiful things."<sup>4</sup>

Here's where the struggling with the images in a parable come in. Here's where we have to start working for the real meaning behind Jesus' parables. While the mustard seed is not the smallest of seeds, and the resulting plant is not the greatest of shrubs, other qualities not mentioned do certainly apply. Qualities the ancients would have known, but we generally do not. Qualities that do provide an accurate description of the kingdom of God.

Just like the mustard seed, which is still fairly small, the kingdom of God—or at least, its manifestation here on Earth—had small, humble beginnings. You could argue that the image of the mustard seed being a weed is apt for the kingdom of God as manifest on Earth. In the eyes of the rest of the world at the time, Judaism, the root of Christianity, was pretty insignificant. And the Christian expression that grew out of it, becoming its own religious tradition, was considered, at least initially, even less significant. While Judaism was tolerated by the Roman Empire, Christianity was not generally accepted. In fact, for the first several hundred years, it had to stay hidden, underground, being practiced in secret, to avoid persecution by the Empire.

Underground. Just like the shoots the mustard plant puts out to propagate itself. Even though the early history of Christianity was largely underground, hidden from the eyes of the establishment, it still, like the mustard plant, thrived. It managed to spread, well, like a weed, throughout the known world. To the point that, like a mustard plant, it eventually displaced many other religious expressions such as the Roman pantheon of gods and other pagan religions. Growing to become the largest religion in the world.

And that's just the part of the kingdom of God that we can see. Think what the kingdom of God in its fullness looks like. The kingdom of God at its fullest expression here on Earth at some point in the future. Not to mention that part of the kingdom of God that we cannot see, will not see, until we enter the eternal life Christ promises us. What Jesus tries to convey in his parable of the mustard seed, even if not quite accurate from a botanical standpoint, still provides a vivid image of the heartiness, the tenacity, the resilience of our faith tradition. It provides an indication of what we can accomplish, what we can become, with God's help.

Which leads to another critical part of this image of the parable of the mustard seed. As implied in the parable, the seed is sown, but then, as we know from what happens with mustard plants literally growing like weeds is that the growth is beyond our control. It is all in God's hands. Sure, we have a part to play. We are called to plant the seeds of faith. But the success, the extent of the growth of the kingdom is out of our hands. That is all God.

I think this last point is particularly important. Particularly for the contemporary church. Particularly for congregations like St. Gregory's. In recent years, we have seen some decline in numbers. As an aging congregation, we have lots of deaths. Many aging folks can no longer come to church. And some people have moved away. Because of societal factors, we have a harder time attracting younger families with kids. Not that we are aren't. It's just more difficult to compete with weekend sports teams and service projects. And truth be told, there really is not a lot we can do about that. Most churches are in the same boat. It doesn't do us any good to sit around and bemoan what we have lost, to complain about what we don't have. It doesn't do any good to try to come up with gimmicks to try to get people to come to church. As Bishop Mary Glasspool once said at a gathering of clergy: "We need to stop worrying about growing the church and instead focus on being the church." Her point was that if we are faithful in living the Gospel, the church will take care of itself. God will take care of the rest.

Interestingly enough, we have seen this during the last 15 months. Because of being locked down, we have not been able to do everything we did before. During this time, we did not worry about "the numbers"—how many people were in worship, how many people attended parish functions. What we did do was continue to be faithful to our core mission and ministry of hospitality. We provided worship services and some other functions online. We continued with our core outreach ministries of feeding God's people. And you know what happened? We have been growing. I've noted in recent sermons how our parish community now includes people from outside our immediate area who have found us, who have joined us online, and have become an integral part of our community. But we have also had other people from the surrounding community who have found us. They have been participating online. Now, as we have started opening up more, some are starting to join us in-person. And others have reached

out wanting to know about St. Gregory's, because they want to be a part of us—to be a part of what we have to offer.

But that is just one aspect of growth. There is also the depth of involvement of those who were already a part of us. Throughout this time of pandemic, more and more of our parishioners have been engaged, through the daily Morning and Evening Prayer services we do in partnership with St. Thomas. Through our weekly Centering Prayer service. Through Bible Study. Through volunteer opportunities at our Food Bank and Feed My Lambs. Through our Community of Care Team that reaches out and keeps our non-tech folk connected. In these ways, parishioners are making a deeper commitment to living the Gospel. A commitment that results in personal spiritual growth while also strengthening and deepening connections within our parish community.

We are a beautiful example of what Jesus was talking about in the parable of the mustard seed. We have sown the seeds. We have done our part. We have been faithful. And God has been faithful in return. God has blessed us with growth in a variety of ways. As we continue to open up and return to whatever will become our “new normal,” just think of what we can accomplish. Or rather, just think of what God can accomplish through us and the seeds we have faithfully and lovingly sown.

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<sup>1</sup> “Seed Power: SALT’s Lectionary Commentary for Third Week after Pentecost,” SALT, June 7, 2021. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2021/6/7/seeds-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-third-week-after-pentecost>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.