

**Sunday, June 16, 2024**  
**Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 6, Year B)**

1 Samuel 15.34—16.13; Mark 4.26-34

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/904023421738465>

*(Sermon begins at about 21:35)*

**“Seeds of Possibility”**

Our Gospel reading for today is a portion of a much larger scene in which Jesus is preaching to a large crowd. He is attempting to convey to those gathered what the kingdom of God is like. As is typical of Jesus, he uses a series of parables to convey his message. Parables are merely stories using common, everyday imagery to convey some deeper spiritual or moral truth. The challenge with parables is that you have to work to figure out the deeper spiritual message being conveyed. As the closing verse of today’s passage notes, “With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.” All well and good for the disciples. Jesus gave them the expanded, annotated version. But the rest of us are left to struggle through and try to figure out what he’s talking about. To try to figure out the hidden message. In using parables, Jesus wanted his audience to figure it out for themselves. This would help the message to become more ingrained, as well as make it more personal, more applicable, to the individual.

To make matters more complicated for us today, parables typically use images from everyday life. The problem is the images used were of everyday life in first century Palestine; ones that Jesus’ original audience would have been intimately familiar with. Although, not necessarily to us in 21st century America. Like in today’s passage. Jesus tells two parables to convey what the kingdom of God is like using agricultural imagery. “The kingdom of God is as if someone scattered seed on the ground” and then the seed does what seed is supposed to do: grow into plants. And the kingdom of God is “like a mustard seed” which does what mustard seeds do: grow. In this case into something big and spectacular. This is fine as far as it goes. We understand that, when planted, seeds grow. But for most of us, that’s about it. Unless we happen to be farmers, gardeners, or plant biologists, that’s probably the extent of our experience with seeds and with plants growing.

The ancients who heard Jesus’ original message 2,000 years ago have a distinct advantage over us. They knew the realities of growing food. They did it. They lived it. In ways we don’t. Most of us think food comes from a grocery store. For us, the biggest frustration when it comes to getting food, aside from the high prices, is going to the store and finding they are out of what we want. We can just drive to another store. For the ancients, if the seeds did not sprout, if the growing conditions were not just right, they might not have any food at all. So, for them, the common theme in these parables was certainly the seeds planted, but even more so the growing conditions. The conditions that make the difference between abundance or scarcity; between food on the table or going hungry. And one of the primary qualities determining between the former and the latter was the ground in which the seeds were planted.

That being the case, what Jesus is using as the analogy for the kingdom of God is not so much the seeds but rather the ground. The ground being the medium of nurture and growth for the seeds, just as the kingdom of God is the medium of nurture and growth for those who inhabit the kingdom of God. Which, in the parables' imagery makes us the seeds. Those who, at our births are planted in the ground that is the kingdom of God. Seeds that contain the potential to grow into something more—into those who grow in stature to make the beautiful garden that is God's kingdom.

If this is what is behind Jesus' parables—and the beauty of parables is that they allow for varied interpretations—if this is what is behind the parables we heard today, then they are really about how we grow into and contribute to the beauty of the kingdom of God. The first parable deals with preparing soil for what is to come—something that is beyond the control of the seeds. Yet, necessary for growth nonetheless. This is about God preparing the conditions for growth. For the seed or for us. As noted in the parable, once scattered, "the seed would sprout and grow, [the sower] does not know how." That growth occurs naturally, organically. There is nothing we can do to make growth happen. It happens at its own pace under God's loving care. Perhaps the most important lesson of this parable being that we have one job in this garden that is the kingdom of God: to grow in our lives of faith. To allow God to provide us with what we need to grow in our lives of faith. All else proceeds from that.

Which leads us to the parable that follows: the parable of the mustard seed. Certainly, one of the more well-known parables. One that is often interpreted from the standpoint of how the kingdom of God will develop from humble beginnings to become something grand and glorious, providing shelter and nurture. Which is certainly an appropriate and lovely image for the kingdom of God. But what if we shift the perspective ever so slightly to look at what the parable of the mustard seed has to say about us individually?

First, like the ancients, we need to understand a few things about the mustard seed. Beyond what is in the parable. Because the reality is, as with so many of Jesus' stories, the parable of the mustard seed is meant to be a poetic literary device. As it so happens, one that is filled with hyperbole. Of the mustard seed, we are told, it "is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

First off, the mustard seed is NOT the smallest of seeds. There are plenty of seeds that are smaller than the mustard seed. Nor is a mature mustard plant the greatest of all shrubs with large branches. While under the right conditions, they can grow to a fairly good size, by and large your average mustard plant is pretty small and scraggly. They do not generally get large enough to have branches that could accommodate bird nests. Certainly not as grand as Jesus states. And certainly not something that would, in general, be desirable to have around. In fact, in the ancient Near East, farmers would have considered the mustard plant to be an invasive weed. Mustard plants spread very quickly, sending out shoots underground, causing damage to other plants in the garden or field. Mustard plants were not something to be intentionally sowed, but rather something to be avoided. And when present, something to be rooted out and destroyed.

So, did Jesus lie to his hearers, and to us? Well, not exactly. The specifics may not have been strictly factual. However, Jesus was known to use hyperbole in his parables, as a teaching device; to grab the attention of his audience. They would have known what he said was not factual. Which would have been a clue that they were to listen all the more closely to try to figure out just what he was really trying to convey.

As to the small size of the seed, the message was that the smallest of seeds could easily be viewed as insignificant. What could possibly come from such insignificant seeds? Particularly one that was also viewed as an invasive weed, as destructive and to be avoided. This would have resonated with many in Jesus' original audience who themselves were often viewed as insignificant and unwanted: those who were often poor and on the edges of society. Those who were often marginalized and, in the eyes of society, certainly had no power. And in some cases, maybe even viewed as having no inherent value whatsoever. Many who heard this parable would have seen themselves as being like the mustard seed. Essentially small, insignificant, and worthless.

And then for Jesus to say that such seeds could possibly grow into the greatest of all shrubs, with the potential to even provide a home for birds to make their nests would have been an amazing message of hope. An amazing message of promise. That even though viewed as insignificant by society, as being viewed as something invasive and in need of being avoided, if not rooted out, in the kingdom of God they would be significant. That even though viewed by society as small, insignificant, and even invasive, in the kingdom of God they are something beautiful and of great value. Instead of being viewed as worthy of elimination, in the kingdom of God they have the potential to be of significant benefit, even contributing to the nurture and wellbeing of others.

In short, Jesus' message in the parable of the mustard seed was one of hope, one of possibility. Jesus is challenging his audience to question the status quo, to question what's possible, and to imagine something bigger, something better, something more beautiful, for themselves. That no matter who they are, no matter who they view themselves to be, they are of far greater value and have far greater potential in God's economy.

We see an example of this played out in our Old Testament reading. This is the story of Samuel seeking to identify a replacement for King Saul, who has fallen into disfavor with God. God sends Samuel to the family of Jesse of Bethlehem to anoint one of his sons to be the next king. Samuel is presented with seven of the eight sons of Jesse, but tension mounts as each is passed over. None of these are chosen by God as worthy of being king of Israel. As God tells Samuel, "the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." It turns out that God has chosen David, the eighth and youngest son to be king. The one who, in the eyes of society, because of birth order, was least significant. The one who, in the eyes of Jesse and his family, was not even worthy of being presented to God's chosen representative, but relegated to tend the flocks like a mere servant. And yet, it was this least among the sons of Jesse who God chooses not only to be king, but to be the one who would become the greatest king Israel would ever know. The one by whom all kings for all time

would be compared. The one who would even become the model for the conventional understanding of messiah.

Scripture is filled with images of what the kingdom of God is like. Scripture is filled with stories of those chosen by God to be instrumental in bringing about the kingdom of God. In nearly all cases, those called to be a part of the kingdom of God, to work on behalf of the kingdom, to help make the kingdom of God a reality, are those who at first glance would otherwise be overlooked, ignored, even avoided, by conventional society. But this is not how the kingdom of God operates. The kingdom of God is all about possibilities. The kingdom of God is about the hope and the promise that, with God's nurture and care, we all, no matter who we are, no matter how society views us, no matter how we perceive ourselves, have the potential to grow into the vision of who God has created and called us to be: a significant and valued participant in the kingdom of God. And that vision is limited only by our willingness to embrace and live into it.