

“The Gospel According to Gardeners”

Mark 4:30-34

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This morning our attention is drawn to the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus is doing what he seemed to enjoy the most during his public ministry, teaching people how to live in the world God created.

Evidently he was a superb teacher because he drew large crowds whenever he spoke. Word spread quickly wherever Jesus was, and people surrounded him in order to hear what he had to say about the mysteries of life and faith.

On this particular day, the crowd was so large that Jesus decided to get into a boat and teach just a few yards off shore so people could see and hear him better. It was from this floating podium that Jesus told the parable that is our text for today.

“Again he said, ‘What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.’

With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.” (Mark 4:30-34)

I love the way Jesus interacts with the crowd as he tells this parable. It is as if he is thinking out loud as he seeks their input.

I can see him as he pauses after asking this question about the kingdom of God. Perhaps he sees a mustard plant growing in the distance and points to it.

“Look over there,” he may have said. “Do you see that large mustard plant on the hillside? That’s what the kingdom of God is like. It is like a mustard seed that grows into a shrub as big as that one.”

What point was Jesus making by comparing the kingdom of God to a mustard seed? I pondered this for some time last week and believe it to be this.

Everyone listening to Jesus that day could partner with God to make the world a better place for all people. This was true if they were wealthy and powerful or if they were a lowly peasant struggling to survive.

Every person could make a difference and help fulfill God’s dreams for making this a just and peaceful world by sowing seeds of goodness and kindness as they went about their daily lives. They could trust God to use those seeds, as tiny and insignificant as they may seem, to inspire and influence others.

I don’t think this message was lost on the people that day, and I believe it was warmly received. Most people in that crowd felt pretty small and insignificant. The religious and secular leaders barely noticed them and rarely, if ever, sought their advice.

Decisions were made by the wealthy and powerful. They were the most influential people and the ones capable of bringing about change.

For the most part, the people standing around the Sea of Galilee listening to Jesus that day were not movers and shakers. They were ordinary in every way, and anything they might do, even for God, would be as unnoticeable as one mustard seed.

Not so, Jesus told them through this parable. And why did Jesus feel this way? He had confidence in the power of God to use the slightest act of kindness or word of encouragement to open eyes, hearts and minds to a new and better way of living.

Do you know how many mustard seeds it takes to weigh one ounce? I didn't think so. It is approximately 21,000.

It is one of our smallest seeds. However, when that tiny seed is planted and watered, it can grow into an eight to ten foot bush that provides shelter and shade for birds.

This tiny seed can also save lives because, as avid gardeners know, mustard seeds have medicinal value and the leaves provide nourishment. Ground up and mixed with vinegar, mustard seeds can be used to treat bites from serpents and scorpions. When chewed, the mustard plant can relieve the pain brought on by toothaches. Mustard seeds and leaves are also good for digestion and can clear sinuses.

Never underestimate the value of the smallest act of benevolence or the potential it holds to change a life for the better. With God, there are no little things, and no one is unimportant.

Who planted a mustard seed in your heart that changed your life? What did they say or do that caught your attention? Was it a compliment, a challenge, a warning, a bit of advice, an idea or a word of scripture?

Did they point out an opportunity before you that you had overlooked? Did they see potential in you that you were ignoring?

How long did that seed lie dormant before you watered and cultivated it? How has that seed grown and changed your life?

Looking back, I realize almost every change I have made in my life, challenge I have accepted or opportunity I have seized had its beginning in a seed planted in my heart by a family member, a teacher, a coach, a friend, a mentor, a neighbor, a fellow worker or another church member. I am not sure many of them know the full impact of their words or deeds, although I have made an effort in recent years to tell the people who planted those seeds the role they played in decisions I have made.

I hope heaven is a place where this kind of sharing takes place often. I have many people there I want to thank.

Who needs you to plant a seed in their heart? Don't talk yourself out of doing it. Their self-esteem, confidence, values, priorities, relationships and future depend upon you giving God an opportunity to use the seed you plant to alter the course of their life. Do not underestimate the power of God!

Several years ago, George Burns played the role of God in the comedy, "Oh, God!" This movie was based upon a 1971 novel by the same title written by Avery Corman.

The story centers on an unassuming supermarket manager named Jerry Landers (played by John Denver) who has been chosen by God to spread his message of hope and goodwill. No one believes Landers when he tells them about his encounters with God and the mission assigned to him.

Friends, family members, the media and religious authorities are all skeptical and ridicule him. Near the end of the movie, God tells Landers it is time to move on to other projects. Landers and others involved in this scene conclude this mission was a failure and they 'blew it'! God, however, quickly responded, "O, I don't think so. You never know; a seed here, a seed there, something will catch hold and grow."

I hope that something is a seed you plant this week.

