

June 13, 2021  
Third Sunday after Pentecost  
“The Potato Patch”  
Ezekiel 17:22-24 ~ 2 Corinthians 5:6-10 ~ Mark 4:26-34

I like to think I'm the patient type. I have so many faults, so I'm sometimes hopeful that impatience isn't one of them. However, when I read this kingdom parable, I saw myself in a different light. I know deep in my heart that if I were a gardener, I would be extraordinarily *impatient* when it comes to planting. I'd be okay with plants once they got above ground. For the most part. I would enjoy checking on the zucchini that was just an inch long yesterday and is 2 ½ inches long today. I would know that a day would come before long when I would happen upon one that had been hiding under the leaves and had become the size of a small submarine because I missed seeing it. But it's the things that grow underground that would give me fits. Why? Because I can't see them.

Potatoes would be the worst. You have to wait until harvest to see if anything is there. I'd never have the patience for that. I would just have to trust that a beautiful reward is waiting.

And today's parable tells me that that's what the kingdom of God is like. And no, I didn't make that up. Jesus said it.

*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.*

But I think God's kingdom may be more like planting potatoes. You can't really see what's happening until harvest time. But all the while, the thing you planted is developing into something valuable. Invisible, yes, but growing nonetheless.

The kind way you raised your children will probably someday, some way, help to make them into kind people. The justice you work for now may not be harvested for years, even decades. The way you treat someone else will likely come back to you in similar form. The time you spend in volunteering or study or prayer and meditation or family life or your job will make you a better person, and those around you will also benefit.

One day that potato will see the light of day, and when you add the butter and sour cream of experience, the product will be rich and delicious.

But we still worry don't we. We still don't completely trust God's promises.

Is the harvest going to be big enough? We need to do more, do something, because if we don't have a bumper crop this year, we may have to sell the farm.

My email is constantly filled with articles about how the church can't survive the current decline in worship ... why millennials are leaving the church ... the rise of the "Nones" who have no religious affiliation at all ... and the church's waning influence. Mixed with these are letters to the dying church.

We're afraid the community church is going the way of the family farm, so we better do something and we better do it now!

The thinking goes that it's not enough to scatter seed ... we need to genetically alter the seed, so it grows more easily in any kind of soil ... so it produces more ... so it is heartier and healthier and more resilient. We need a Gospel that will grow in today's world, so let's create a hybrid. We need a bit more prosperity to go with this Gospel to the poor ... a bit more glitz and glam to graft onto this humble Gospel.

Changing the seed isn't enough, though. We need to change the soil the seed grows in. Let's change the worship ... more lights, more entertainment. The Gospel can't grow in thousand-year-old liturgies, after all! We need to till up the worship ... break up the unplowed ground of these dusty old sanctuaries.

Now, hear me clearly, I have nothing against mega churches and their bookstores and gift shops and Starbucks and multiple basketball courts. I believe they are doing the Lord's work. I just wonder how you form close connections in a family of 7,000.

We're afraid we aren't doing enough or aren't doing it well enough. Doing more, though, is usually a sign that you don't trust what you're doing. We don't trust that the seed will grow. We don't trust the power of the Gospel to grow of itself.

The reactionary response is to just throw up our hands and say, "Okay, God, if you want this Kingdom of yours to grow, then you better get to it."

But the parable doesn't release us from all responsibility. Jesus isn't advocating *Field of Dreams* evangelism. "Well, we put a sign at the road and we have worship, so if God wants this church and the Kingdom to grow then God will bring in the people." If you offer it, they won't necessarily come. Though I think many of us wish that were the case. Don't we?

On the other hand, the parable shatters any illusions we have that the fate of the Kingdom is in our hands. The Church isn't in a Young Adult Novel ... we aren't the plucky, unlikely teen heroes who must rise to some impossible challenge to save the Kingdom of God on earth.

We are Kingdom workers ... not Kingdom bringers or Kingdom savers. We plant the seeds and we prepare for the harvest, whenever it suddenly bursts from the earth.

But will it be big enough? It seems to get smaller every year. Fewer baptisms, fewer members, fewer pledges ... will it be big enough?

The Kingdom starts like the smallest seed, a mustard seed, so it's not looking great. How big could it get? Certainly not big enough to fill our sanctuary. Certainly not big enough to meet our budget. Certainly not big enough to put a dent in our city's poverty ... moral and financial. What's a small church, a small denomination, a small Gospel, going to do in a big world?

But the mustard seed grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs. That's what it does. But a shrub? Really? A shrub? Heavens no! We want an orchard of trees, we want a field of flowers, we want a plantation of cash crops, not a shrub. Not even the greatest of all shrubs.

I think we prefer Ezekiel's cedar, in Ezekiel 17 ... a big, strong tree that houses every kind of bird on the earth. Why can't we have a tree like that? Now *that's* big enough. We want Ezekiel's cedar. We want the tree, not the shrub.

But we also want forbidden fruit, golden calves, our father's inheritance, and a Savior who doesn't have to die, so maybe our judgment isn't as great as the greatest of all shrubs.

Ezekiel's cedar symbolizes God's restoration of the Davidic Kingdom, an earthly kingdom mighty and proud. But earthly kingdoms rise and fall. And the bigger they are, the weaker they get. Every empire that grows, believing it can become big enough for the whole world, eventually topples like a felled tree.

Mustard, after all, was a lot less like a flowering shrub that we might plant around the edges of our property as an accent ... than it was an invasive weed ... something you want to keep out of your garden and lawn at all costs because it runs amok easily, gets out of hand, and nearly takes over whatever ground it infests.

And so also, with God's kingdom. If it were sold in a box, it would likely have a warning – “*use only in moderation*” or perhaps even “*maybe hazardous to your health.*” But that's just it, the kingdom *isn't* a commodity to be bought and sold, used diligently but carefully. It's a new reality that invades, overturns, and eventually overcomes the old one. It's a word of promise that creates hope and expectation ... leads people to change their jobs to share it ... and to leave behind their old ways to live into it. The kingdom is dangerous because you just don't know where it will take you ... or what you will do when it seizes hold of you.

The mustard plant does not rise so high that it may topple and fall like the mighty cedars. It remains lowly, like a King who enters a city humble and riding on a donkey ... who comes not to be served but to serv ... and who humbles himself to take the form of a servant.

The Kingdom of God is great in its humility and lowness. It stoops to wash feet ... it kneels by wounded strangers on the side of the road. It is lifted up, not on the shoulders of servants, but on a cross.

This lowly shrub is big enough for birds of every kind to find a home: Jew and Gentile, male and female, black and white, gay and straight, rich and poor, introvert and extrovert. Birds of every feather can flock together because this shrub, this Kingdom, this Gospel, this God, is big enough.

The Kingdom of God starts off small and grows of itself ... independent of our tricks, trends, and tampering. It grows in ways we cannot see and cannot know, until it breaks forth from the ground and becomes the greatest of all shrubs ... big enough for people to come from east and west and north and south ... from left and right ... from uptown and downtown ... to sit at the Table together. If only all of our churches and hearts were so big.

Perhaps at times we think our church work is in vain. Maybe we believe the soil or the seed has gone bad so the fields will soon be left fallow. We're afraid our efforts and our talents aren't big enough for the harvest we need. The good news, though, is the harvest isn't dependent on our efforts. The seed grows without us, but the seed still needs to be sown. The mustard plant is an annual ... it requires renewed sowing to populate the earth, but the promise of its potential life remains in the power of the seed, not the power of the sower.

The harvest is coming, and it will not be of our own making or doing, but we get to bring it in.

On that day we will know just how those seeds we sowed grew in people's hearts ... sprouted in communities ... and bloomed across the world. We will marvel at all the ways the preaching and hearing of the Good News brought hope, peace, joy, and love. We will wonder when it happened ... how it happened.

But then we'll remember that the Kingdom of God is like someone who goes out to sow seed and then sleeps and rises day after day, all while the seed sprouts and grows. He knows not how. And those tiny seeds ... tiny like a mustard plant ... grow to become the greatest of shrubs ... big enough for all the birds of the air to build nests in its shade.

We will be amazed, but we won't be surprised.

May we pray?

God of mercy and God of grace, we thank you that you are a God who is big enough, big enough to take in our work and to use it, big enough to work while we sleep, big enough for all people to be welcome in your kingdom, big enough to overcome our sin, big enough to use our love. Lord, we thank you and we look forward to the day when the harvest comes in. Amen.