

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
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Mark 4:26-34
Seeds of Faith

The crowds who gathered around Jesus did not need him to describe for them about how life was right then. They knew how life was. They knew what it was like to scrape out an existence living off the land, growing crops, herding sheep, tending gardens. They knew what it was like living by the sea, repairing nets, hoping for a big catch. They already knew a lot about worldly kingdoms and earthly powers: Caesar on his throne, foreign soldiers patrolling their streets, taxing their pocketbooks, defiling their temple. Jesus did not need to tell the crowds about their lives right then; he needed to tell them about life with God. So as they huddled around and quieted down so he could speak, he said to them, “The realm of God, the dominion of the Lord God is like this...”

Jesus’ words had a scandalous quality to them, like whispered words of sedition spoken only after glancing carefully over your shoulder to make sure no Roman centurions were in earshot. Jesus said, “God’s realm is like this...” And as the people leaned in closer, spiritually hungry, anxious to catch his every word, Jesus (to their surprise) talked to them about...seeds. “The realm of God is as if someone scatters seed on the ground, which then sprouts and grows and bears fruit in marvelous ways no one fully understands. The dominion of God is like a tiny mustard seed that you’d normally never even notice; but once it is planted, it grows into a magnificent bush you can’t take your eyes off of.”

Jesus knew that everyone had planted seeds before; and, on occasion, they had been struck by the sheer wonder of how living plants emerge from those small, dried-up kernels of grain. He knew they had experienced going to sleep at night with their field brown and empty, only to awake the next morning and see that it was suddenly alive and green with young seedlings. Miraculous things and worthy of our praise, yes. But Caesar is still on the throne. Centurions still patrol the streets. Life is hard and justice is not the true law of the land. So why talk of seeds now?

Jesus only smiled and drew in the crowd even closer. These parables he told them were unabashedly optimistic. He reminded them that God is in charge. God’s word has gone forth; God’s spirit is moving over the land; God’s seeds have been planted in the ground (and in the hearts) all around them. And these seeds will grow and produce fruit. And not only don’t we know how this happens, it’s not dependent on us at all. It’s not about our ability or our fame; it’s not about armies and golden thrones, or about mega-churches and glossy ad campaigns. It’s not about you and me – it’s about God, who sows seeds, whose eye is on the sparrow, who knows your name and your name and all your hearts.

At this point Jesus is no longer whispering. He doesn’t care who hears what he has to say. With outstretched arms, he said to them, “The dominion of God is in right here, in your midst, growing up all around you. So get a good night’s rest. Sleep like babes in

your mother's arms. Trust in God, and not in your own frenetic busyness, your own works righteousness, your own nervous energy expended as if the entire future of the world depended upon you. Because it doesn't. God alone is God. And while we work and while we sleep, God is in our midst in a hundred-thousand-thousand ways. By grace, green seedlings are emerging through dry soil. Out of love, mustard plants are becoming leafy nesting places for countless flocks of birds. All around us, fresh hope is being birthed after long, dark nights of despair. Why? Because God is love and the reign of God is mysterious and loving and at work independent of us yet always for us. Such is the wonder of our faith." At least, that's what I imagine Jesus said.

On that day long ago, Jesus told two parables that defy human pessimism and failure. They speak of optimism and promise, as they tell of a God whose goodness grows exponentially, as if from a tiny mustard seed into a thriving, leafy bush. Every fall, my wife Beth cuts back our clematis vines, cropping them off very close to the ground. And every spring, I am always amazed how from a withered dead root, a luxuriant, sprawling mass of green leaves and purple flowers emerges. With the proper trellis, this crazy plant grows taller than me in a clearly joyful spirit of natural abundance. That's the same spirit behind Jesus' joyful parables.

But, I must confess, just behind the clematis vine is a despicable mock orange bush in our back yard. We have hacked it back mercilessly, but every year out of spite it grows back even larger than the year before – with its drooping branches that make it hard to push the lawn mower around it, and its tiny seedlings that spread themselves like enemy outposts all through the lawn. And if it's not the mock orange plant, there are also the cursed dandelions, battalions of weeds emerging from the wispiest of tiny white-tailed seeds. Or the annoying plants that sprout in the sidewalk cracks, taunting me to remove them if I can, knowing full well that I'll never get their every last root, so they'll see me again soon after the next rainfall.

Yes, from a tiny seed grows a large and thriving mustard plant, but in the same way also grow weeds, thorns and poison ivy. Yes, with God, goodness emerges and grows mysteriously and exponentially – but so too does fear and anger, paranoia, racism, and distrust. What are we to do with a world that has both mustard seeds and pernicious weeds growing in the same garden?

Again Jesus draws us close and quietly reassures us that the presence of weeds does not make the roses any less beautiful. If anything, the roses inspire us to pull weeds. The same spirit that grows the flowers and mustard plants, that causes seeds of justice and mercy and love to burst forth and bear fruit, transforms our entire world. This world is not about kingdoms for Caesar. It's not about dictators and fear-mongers and neo-Nazis and misguided suicide bombers. This truly is God's dominion, where even the smallest seeds will bear huge results.

I think I've mentioned before about the singer Anne Brown whose powerful voice earned her the role of Bess in George Gershwin's opera "Porgy and Bess." After a successful run in New York City, the show was taken on tour. But when Ms. Brown found out they

had been booked in a segregated theater in Washington, D.C., she refused to sing, saying she could never perform in an auditorium in which her own family could not attend. So arrangements were made to integrate that theater for one week only, and Anne Brown planted seeds that later led to the abolition of segregation and Jim Crow laws in America.

Basketball great Bill Russell has been called the smartest player ever to play the game and a true team leader.¹ He focused not only on his own skills, but more importantly, on working to make the worst player on his team good. The story is told how, back in the early 1960s, Bill Russell's team was in Lexington, Kentucky for an exhibition match. While there, he and the other black members of the team were refused service in the hotel restaurant. So Bill led his black teammates out of the hotel, refused to play the exhibition game and took them all home, planting a seed for justice that in time grew to national anti-discrimination laws.

There are millions of these examples – seeds scattered – faith lived with integrity and conviction – a gospel growing undiminished year after year, growing up from simple acts and small seeds. Preacher Martha Sterne has said that this is the God we're to follow. The One who showed up 2000 years ago doing small things in a day and age of small things. Offering a healing touch here, a compassionate word there. Small things like not giving up on flawed friends. Like praying every day. Like speaking truth to power. Like cupping a child's chin in a loving hand and saying "Of such as these is the realm of God."

Small things done are not inconsequential. That's what Jesus' parables teach. But let's be clear. Their message of optimism and growth that is not meant to encourage passivity. Far from it. Yes, the seeds grow and we know not how – but someone needs to plant the seeds, and bring in the harvest, so that others can be fed and future crops can be planted. We need Anne Browns and Bill Russells. We need Dr. King and Gandhi, Dorothy Day and Ruth Bader Ginsberg. We need you – as a parent sowing seeds in your children. We need you – as a friend who sows seeds of love. We need you – as a child of God to do small things, to avoid little sins that wound others, to be a sower of seeds of faith.

In his best stage whisper with a gleam in his eye, Jesus said, "God's world is like seeds that grow, wonderfully, freely, joyfully. And they're in your pockets to sow. They are in your hands to toss about generously. They're in your hearts anxious to burst forth in flower. Let those who have ears to hear and hearts hungry for more, heed my words of faith."

AMEN

¹ Anecdote from New York Times Book Review, review of Red and Me by Bill Russell; review by Bill Bradley, June 7, 2009, p. 10.