

June 14, 2015

TEXT: Mark 4:26–34

TITLE: Plan B

I am occasionally reminded of the time that I attended a wedding with my parents when I was just three years old. I remember the wedding—well, parts of it, at least - the bride's maid dresses in every color; balloons all over the dance floor. But the story always circles back to a conversation I had with the groom—a close friend of my Dad's. He asked me if I remembered my parents' wedding. I replied, very matter-of-fact, "*No. I wasn't there. I was just a seed.*"

Like any gardener—or, anyone who enjoys the smell of wet dirt following a rainstorm, or anyone who remains amazed at how quickly winter turns to spring through the greening of the trees—I am enamored with seeds. I like things with potential, you see. And potential is something of which seeds have plenty. I like the surprise that comes when a small round brown seed sprouts a bean that can be eaten or a handful of bulbs can produce tulips of any color. Seeds hold within themselves the possibility of what can be—and invite us to explore exciting possibilities together.

Jesus tells us two stories today—two parables—using a small seed to convey the magnitude of the kingdom of God. These small seeds are full of potential. Somehow, miraculously, the smallest of seeds pushes through the blanket of earth in which it was planted and grows into, even, the largest of plants.

In the first parable, we are told that the kingdom of God is like a man who scatters seeds on the ground. Whether the farmer is awake or asleep doesn't much matter, we are told, for without our help or our even knowing it, the soil produces the grain, which grows to maturity—until it is time for the harvest. The Greek in the original text says the ground is, in fact, *automatic*.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. Again we hear of a small seed—a mustard seed this time. The kingdom of God is like the smallest of seeds, which grows to be the largest bush in the field. In fact, the mustard plant is one that has the potential to take over any garden, growing almost uncontrollably. Something small and insignificant grows to something of great significance and presence. Such is the kingdom of God.

Now, I confess that I'm not the world's best gardener. I can grow low-maintenance, hearty perennials like a champ, but so far that's the scope of my gardening skills. So I like this low maintenance brand of gardening of which Jesus speaks—where scattered seeds can grow without manipulation or even attention—because the seed and the earth have all the tools they need to make things grow.

But when it comes to rest of life, such limited engagement doesn't suit me. I like to attend. I like to fuss. *I like to be in control.* And so the first parable comes to me as a challenge and an invitation: to let go; to trust God; to *partner* with the divine rather than trying to hand God a to-do list for the day. The parable blesses us with a reminder of the reality of providential grace—a grace that fills even the soil of the earth upon which we live. *A grace that is gives life.*

The mustard seed parable heralds the underdog. We see this story play out on many stages throughout scripture. We saw it in the Old Testament lesson in which David, the youngest son, was anointed King. We read of a God who recognizes potential when God sees it. We read of a God who can take what is small and insignificant and do mighty things—in the life of a man, or in the life of a mustard seed.

So what are we to think about the kingdom of God? It's clear that Jesus wants us to know about it, to think about it, to engage it. In Mark's gospel alone—which is the shortest gospel of them all—the Kingdom of God is referenced 17 times. The parables that we read for today show us glimpses of qualities of the kingdom of God: a kingdom in which God's grace is the key ingredient; a kingdom in which the lowly is lifted up—the small become mighty, the weak become strong; a kingdom in which things grow; a kingdom in which life abounds.

But what is our role? The parables almost make it seem that we can just sit back and watch and know that the kingdom of God will unfold in its time, in its way, in its fullness. And, frankly, as people of faith we might say that it probably so. But when we look closer, we see that even the sleeping farmer had to scatter the seed and had to wake up in time for the harvest. The farmer does what the farmer can—and leaves the rest, all that is outside of her control, to God.

It can be said that we have an opportunity to partner with God in the building of God's kingdom. While God is the architect, designer, and chief of construction, we have an open-invitation to sow seeds of compassion, of justice, of hope and of love. We have a call to scatter seeds of kindness everywhere—and can rest assured that every small gesture can have a big impact in shaping this kingdom. Whether we send a card to someone who is hurting or speak up against heterosexism, racism or sexism; whether we let a stranger merge into traffic in front of us or feed a stranger who is hungry; whether we bike to work or grow Basil on our back porch—God can bless and magnify every kingdom-building, life-giving effort we extend. And by God's grace, our efforts can bear fruit.

In November 2004, a 19-year-old named Gary Brolsma from New Jersey made a video to get a laugh out of his friends. He filmed himself lip-syncing to the Romanian pop song "Dragostea Din Tei" as performed by the group "O Zone." He posted it to the website Newsgrounds.com, and, within days, this choppy video of a kid singing and flailing his arms to the beat of a catchy song became the first video to go viral, reaching more than two million viewers on the debut website alone.

The "Numa Numa Song", as the video has been dubbed, kicked off an era of viral videos. Viral videos are, for many of us, our guilty pleasure. Whether we are watching Harvard's 2012 Baseball team lip-syncing to "Call Me Maybe," the latest "how-to-make a smoky eye" tutorial or babies riding on Roombas—there is something about a viral video that gives us hope. Maybe it is the fact that a "nobody" can become "somebody" in seconds. Maybe it is the universal appeal of finding the extraordinary in the ordinary. Maybe it is the possibility that any one of us could, with a camera and an idea, reach the world.

What if the kingdom of God became a viral sensation? What if it grew like a mustard seed and took over the whole garden?

What if God's radical justice and free grace caught on and spread like wildfire? What if the world got very comfortable with the possibility that every small offering of love could be multiplied by God's automatic grace? What if the world saw the universal appeal of welcoming the marginalized and caring for the poor? What if people started to believe that we really could partner with God in a mission of life and love, of hope and peace, of forgiveness and acceptance—and that together we could reach the world?

Mustard seeds and viral videos suggest that it could be so. For, by God's grace, more is possible in this world than we might expect.

Anne Frank wrote: "Everyone has inside of [them] a piece of good news. The good news is that you don't know how great you can be! How much you can love! What you can accomplish! And what your potential is!" ¹

May kingdom potential be born in us and through us. May we scatter seeds of God's love and justice frivolously and thoroughly, to every corner of the earth. May we have the courage to trust—to truly believe—that with God all things are possible.

¹ http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_june_14_2015