

Seeds
Matthew 13:31, 32
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“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a person took and planted in the field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.” With those words from Jesus we gather this morning as ones who are called and challenged to believe that tiny seeds of faith might yield harvests that are abundant and amazing. From a few faithful disciples gathered together waiting for the promised Holy Spirit came an immediate harvest of 3,000 who were baptized on the Day of Pentecost. From two missionaries named Paul and Barnabas, sent out to share the word of God churches were planted in Asia Minor, Macedonia, Greece, and the gospel eventually made it all the way to the heart and soul of the empire that dominated the world at that time, to the city of Rome. From little seeds, great things come.

We have experienced that here at Dunn’s Corners. From a small group that studied the Bible together a call went out for a pastor and over sixty years ago this church community was formed. When there was a need for a preschool ministry that seed was planted and we just celebrated the 50th anniversary of our Early Learning Center, a ministry that has touched literally thousands of lives. Growing out of a desire to see activities for our elderly people and for younger adults with physical and cognitive loss, the Adult Day Care Center of Westerly was started 37 years ago. The Westerly Sun ran a nice article about the Adult Day Care Center on the 35th anniversary and gave special recognition to Florence Madison for her role, and for our church as being the host site in the beginning years. Family Housing Support grew out of a real need for homeless families with children to have safe and affordable housing, and since its inception a few years ago many families have benefitted from this important ministry. And talking about seeds that grow, one of the families has now bought their own home. There were little seeds that started Habitat for Humanity, The Warm Center, Jonnycake Center, and so many other ministries that have literally been fruitful.

So today let us hear the words of Jesus as being full of encouragement. What we are today, where we are today, who we are today, may seem small and insignificant as we are dwarfed by a world of crisis and need and the church seems so small and marginalized in comparison. Little seeds, planted today as we worship, as we serve, as we live, as we love, little seeds of faith grow to be towering bushes for shade, for shelter, and even for salvation.

And yet the words of the parable do more than bring encouragement. They also challenge us to realize God works in ways that we might find strange, out of the ordinary, even out of bounds. As much as we might be attracted to the parable of the mustard seed, some commentators point out that the tree that grows from that seed is pretty much a trash tree. In fact, it isn't really a tree at all. It is a trash bush. Those looking for things that are impressive and majestic might see a trash bush, a mustard tree, and walk right by without pausing to marvel at the wonderful things God is doing. When Jesus follows the parable of the mustard seed with a parable about leaven spreading throughout the whole batch of dough, Jesus is using an image that is potentially very controversial. Leaven was considered unclean in the culture of the day. So in some ways Jesus is saying the kingdom of heaven is like a trash bush or something that you consider unclean...but don't let that fool you. Hidden in these small seeds, in these trash bushes, in these unclean batches of dough, God's good and pure and holy kingdom is coming. God's kingdom of righteousness and peace and justice and love is breaking into this world.

Nevertheless, many will look right past it. Many will miss it. Many will choose to miss it. Many will see the kingdom come among sinners and tax collectors, among the lame, the unclean, the blind, the deaf, the stranger and the alien, and they will be offended. Several times as Jesus tells parables he draws upon the passage in Isaiah 6 that says people will have eyes but not be able to see, ears but not be able to hear. Mustard seeds and leaven are parables of encouragement, while also being parables of warning. Don't miss what is God is doing just because it comes in trash bushes and unclean leaven.

I guess what this perspective reminds me is that the one who sows the seed is not us. God is the sower. He sows seed on the path, among weeds, in rocky soil, and in good soil. God sows seed where we expect it, in churches and Bible studies and camps and mission trips, and God also sows the seed among sinners and tax collectors, with the leper and the lame, with outcasts and social misfits, with the weak, the vulnerable, the broken, the addict, the offender, the stranger, the alien, and even among those we might consider the enemy. When that happens, this parable might well bother us. We want little seeds that grow, but we want them under our control, within the boundaries that make us feel safe, in ways that we expect, and as Presbyterians, we want our seed sown decently and in order. But God is not opposed to using trash bushes and leaven that society thinks is unclean. This parable could be as much about how God miraculously brings growth from tiny seeds as it is about how we respond to the miracles God does. Do we receive them? Do we celebrate them? Do we accept them? Do we welcome them?

I'm pretty sure God recently planted a seed right here at Dunn's Corners. A man named Frank called church a few weeks ago. He asked if he could host a meeting at our church. Frank is a recovering alcoholic. The meeting he wants to host is an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. He wants to host the meeting Monday mornings early, around 6:30, so working folks can attend a meeting before they head to their jobs. I didn't plant that seed. God did. Frank showed up and asked if we would let his group use our church. I thank God Dunn's Corners has a long history hosting an AA meeting, one that meets Tuesday nights. Our Session unanimously endorsed opening our doors for this Monday morning meeting. After he filled out some papers I asked Frank to tell me a bit of his story. In a nutshell he said God saved his life. He was drinking himself to death, burning every bridge with everyone who had ever been his friend or loved him. And when he hit rock bottom God saved him, through an AA meeting and through prayer. He said he hoped that maybe this meeting on Monday mornings might do the same thing for someone else. That was a few weeks ago.

This past week a young man walked in the office and asked if there was an AA meeting here he could attend. Luba and I looked at each other and smiled. We told him about Monday morning. We told him about Tuesday night. We told him he was welcome to come to these meetings. We told him he was welcome here. I hope when you hear this good news you say a prayer for the seeds that will be planted during those AA meetings. I hope when you hear this good new you say a prayer for the leaven that will work its way throughout the whole batch of dough. I hope when you hear this good news you will say a prayer of thanksgiving for the kingdom of God that comes in ways that are unexpected and surprising and absolutely beautiful.

Another parable Jesus tells is about the fortunate person who is able to see that in trash bushes and unclean batches of dough God is doing the miraculous work of bringing the kingdom of heaven. "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who found a pearl of great price...a man who found hidden treasure. At once he sold everything he had so he could buy this pearl, this treasure." When God opens your eyes, when God opens your ears, when God opens your heart, and you see the amazing transformation God is doing as the kingdom of heaven comes, you give everything so you can be part of the miracle, part of the transformation, part of the kingdom.

We hadn't been in Houston very long when one of our church members took me on a tour of the downtown. We stopped in the skyscraper that housed Shell Oil. There in the lobby was a small museum tracking the history of offshore oil drilling. A key component in the ability to drill in deep water was the invention of the semi-submersible drilling platform. My friend waited patiently while I read about the invention of the semi-submersible platform. When I finished reading I looked at

him and said, “Bruce, you invented this!” He smiled. I was standing with a man who changed the course of offshore drilling and who was later elected to the National Academy of Science. He had a long list of titles and honors and awards. One year the huge convention that Houston hosts, known as the OTC (Offshore Technology Conference) honored Bruce with an award. Hundreds of executives filled the room as they gave speeches in his honor. Then they showed a video they had made, with interviews of people who spoke highly of Bruce. At one point in the video Bruce was interviewed. I’ll never forget that moment. This man who in the world of science achieved fame and honor and renown from around the world was asked what he felt was his greatest achievement.

At the time, Bruce was heading up a mentoring program at our church with kids who faced a variety of challenges. He had recruited about 30 people who would go and read to kids, play games with them, listen to them, laugh with them, and be a friend, a role model, a caring adult. When they asked Bruce what he felt his greatest achievement was he said, “Being a mentor to the little boy at the elementary school.” Surely he misspoke. Didn’t these other achievements and accomplishments mean more? My friend Bruce said, “Being a mentor.” I’m sure there were many who were confused by that answer. But Bruce meant it. He had found a pearl of great price. He had found hidden treasure. Others might see it and not understand...not necessarily saying it is a trash bush or an unclean batch of dough...but compared to awards and honors? Somehow, some way, Bruce had come to understand the kingdom of heaven was present in such a simple and yet profound act of being a mentor to a young boy.

The kingdom of heaven is like a pearl...like a treasure...like yeast hidden in and worked throughout a batch of dough. The kingdom of heaven is like a tiny mustard seed...an itsy bitsy mustard seed. It is the smallest of all seeds. But when you plant it, it grows, and provides shelter, and provides shade, and because it is the kingdom of heaven, we believe it provides salvation.

I’m not a farmer nor a gardener, so I cannot speak from experience about seeds and growth and harvests and abundance. But I do love to read, and one of my favorite stories about seeds and growth comes from a book written by Barbara Kingsolver called *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*. The book describes the move Kingsolver made with her family to Virginia, as they decided to try to eat locally for one year. She and her family made the commitment to eat only what they grew or they could purchase from others who lived in their community. They planted a garden. The success of this garden was critical to the family. They needed this garden to be fruitful and multiply. They started with little tiny seeds, itsy bitsy seeds, and they prayed those seeds would grow.

Can you imagine the joy when in the summertime the squash started coming in. Barbara Kingsolver writes, “On July 6 I picked two little pattypan (the white squash that look like flying saucers), four yellow crooknecks, six golden zucchini, and five large Costata Romanescas—a zucchini relative with a beautifully firm texture and a penchant for attaining the size of a baseball bat overnight. ‘I love all this squash,’ I declared, bringing the rainbow of their shapes and colors into the kitchen...I was still cheerful two days later when I brought in the day’s nineteen squash. And then thirty-three more over the next week, including a hefty haul of cubit-long Costatas...We split and stuffed them with sautéed onions, bread crumbs, and cheese, and baked them in our outdoor bread oven. All dinner guests were required to eat squash, and then take some home in plastic sacks.”

Over the next few weeks, as the squash kept coming in, the family tried as many ways as they could imagine to get rid of some of the squash. The problem was that everyone else had planted squash. “It didn’t help that other people were trying to give them to us. One day we came home from some errands to find a grocery sack of them hanging on our mailbox. The perpetrator, of course, was nowhere in sight. ‘Wow,’ we all said—‘what a good idea.’ Garrison Keillor says July is the only time of year when country people lock our cars in the church parking lot, so people won’t put squash on the front seat.”

“It’s a relaxed atmosphere in our little town, plus our neighbors keep an eye out and will, if asked, tell us the make and model of every vehicle that ever enters the lane to our farm. So my family was a bit surprised when I started double-checking the security of doors and gates any time we were all about to leave the premises. ‘Do I have to explain the obvious?’ I asked impatiently. ‘Somebody might try to break in and put zucchini in our house.’”¹

On a day in a time when the kingdom of heaven might feel far away, when the seeds we hold in our hands seem a far cry from the kingdom of heaven that will be full of love and faith, peace and justice, righteousness and equality, I love the idea that someday we’re gonna think about locking the doors of our houses and our cars, because we will be inundated with a harvest that is so abundant and so amazing we will simply be overwhelmed at God’s goodness and God’s grace.

- Someday every child of God will have a roof over their head.
- Someday every table will be filled with food and drink.
- Someday every person will have a job where their worth and their work are rewarded and they labor with dignity in an environment of respect.

¹ Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, pp. 186-188.

- Someday the old and the young and the ones with special needs and the ones who might feel ignored or rejected or judged or condemned will be nurtured and valued and cared for.
- Someday the stranger and the alien and the refugee will find open arms that invite and say, “Welcome! There is a place for you.”
- Someday every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.
- Someday God will wipe every tear from our eyes and there will be no more crying or sadness or pain.

I’m not saying when you leave church today someone will have broken into your car to load you up with zucchini squash...although...you never know. But it could be that someday will be today, and if your car door is unlocked, and the door of your house is left open, and your heart isn’t closed to miracles and blessing, it could be you will find that God has filled it with dough and sheltering trees and pearls and pearls and treasure and treasure...not like the treasures of this world...no, not like the treasures of this world. This treasure is like the kingdom of heaven. When God does surprise us with the kingdom, I hope we have eyes to see. I hope we have ears to hear. And I hope we have voices to sing, for surely the kingdom of God deserves songs of worship and adoration and praise and thanksgiving.