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*Mark 4:26-34*

*He also said, ‘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. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.’*

*He also said, ‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.’*

*With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.*

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Only a few days ago I was in Staten Island gardening with our High School youth. Less than 24 hours before we had been walking up and down 5th Avenue, taking in the sights of Manhattan, traversing that concrete jungle. And then, the next day, we found ourselves on our hands and knees in the dirt, pulling weeds from rows of eggplants and summer squash. Talk about contextual whiplash! Trading one wilderness for another, one an urban setting, another a horticultural one. One where we craned our necks to see the top of the pencil-thin skyscrapers lining the southern border of Central Park, and the other with our gazes upon the ground, doing our best to not accidentally pull up a vegetable that, in due time, would be used to feed the hungry on Staten Island through Project Hospitality, our missional partner for the week.

As the youth and I joked among one another to pass the time as we got our knees and hands dirty with layer upon layer of dirt, I had time to ponder the agricultural nature of both our work this week and this scriptural text written so very long ago. Yes, we live in a world of sometimes dizzying change and face-paced city living. But, also, some things don’t change. The smell of dirt. The necessity of weeding. The patience it takes to grow things from the ground. The wisdom cultivated over the years that makes a good gardener. The truth of both the predictability and the *un*predictability of planting things. Things we can control and things we can’t.

Such is the essence of these two parables set back-to-back in the fourth chapter of Mark’s Gospel.

The first story tells us of someone who scatters seed upon the ground; apparently without much regard to where it falls. He then goes about his business, rising and falling with the pattern of the sun for quite some time. The earth does its thing and the seeds begin to take root. Once the green blade rises and the wheat is ready to harvest, he goes out, sickle in hand, to reap abundantly what was apparently so casually sown.

I wonder what this parable says to you? To me, this day, it teaches me that there’s a certain surrender that we must accept when we go about the business of planting things. Yes, there are limited things we can do to mitigate particular circumstances.

* We can be mindful of **when** we plant. Plant too early and a late freeze will ruin it. Plant too late, on the other hand, and you plant isn’t going to thrive.
* We can be mindful of **where** we plant. One of the benefits of my upper deck garden is that I don’t have to worry about dear or rabbits helping themselves to my produce. On the other hand, I’m pretty limited in the amount that I can grow. Additionally, one must be mindful of the amount of sun a certain plant gets; some like more than others!
* We can be mindful of **what** we plant. On the back of every seed packet you buy at a store, you’ll see the different regions of the United States and whether or not it is recommended that that plant is suited for the weather of your context. For example, we’re a bit too north for most citrus plants. Tricia and I get around this by moving our blood orange plant inside the house during the cold winter months.

All this being said, one can do all the “right” things and still come up empty. Though the season is still early, some things are beginning to come in on my back porch. Predictably, my summer squash is exploding, the yellow-orange blossoms have made their dramatic entrance which tells me that the veggies aren’t far behind. I have a numerous herbs that are doing well. But, much to my frustration, my tomato plants just won’t get with the program! I’ve done everything right. I’ve pruned them with care. Watered them regularly. Made sure that they have plenty of sun. But they just haven’t thrived. Instead, they’ve withered and died. I wait with hopeful anticipation that they’ll bounce back but each day passes and I’m beginning to resign myself to the fact that this just wasn’t the year for me and my tomatoes.

Such, at times, is the frustration of being the Church these days; the seeds we scattered that took root decades ago aren’t taking any more. The days of “build it and they will come” are over. The days of social obligation to attend church are over. Gone are the days when church membership was a requirement of a thriving business or a successful political candidacy. Many of us continue to grieve that such has come to be. Some believe that the Church is better for it, making the case that the Church has rarely been at its most faithful when it has been most popular.

Regardless, perhaps there’s wisdom in the character in today’s parable who scatters seed and trusts that the earth will yield when and where its ready. They don’t give themselves some sort of “God complex;” but surrender to the natural ebb and flow of creation. No, my friends, this doesn’t mean that we though strategy or common sense into the wind. I don’t think Jesus meant this parable to encourage foolishness or apathy. Instead, I see this parable as a lesson in surrender and trust. Surrendering our will to God’s will and trusting that God’s kingdom is something far beyond our control or comprehension.

Now the second portion of this pair of parables is perhaps the more familiar; the parable of the mustard seed. As I mentioned, a few days ago I was on my hands and knees in a garden in Staten Island. As I uprooted weeds from rows of eggplants and summer squash, I pondered why Jesus didn’t choose literally any *other* plant than a mustard plant. Why not a juicy tomato or a crispy pepper? Certainly a summer squash, with its mighty prickly leaves and alien-like deep-green stalk, would make a fitting metaphor for the Kingdom of God. Or perhaps something like rosemary which is seemingly indestructible or mint, that grows anywhere whether you want it to or not?

**Well, two observations: the mustard plant was A) largely unwanted and B) a place of protection and rest for other creatures.**

Y’all know what kudzu is? Take a drive north of here up Highway 220 and you’ll see plenty of it by the side of the road. If I’m remembering correctly, kudzu is a plant native to Japan that was brought here to the states largely to prevent erosion on steep hills. Well, it got the job done! A little *too* well, actually. It’s an invasive species that grows like, well, a weed. In fact, the US Congress voted in 19978 to add it to the federal noxious weed list. We had so much kudzu in my hometown of Dalton, Georgia that we had an annual Kudzu festival.

Well, I sometimes liken the mustard plant to kudzu. It was an invasive species of sorts and was kind of like mint. Mint, I’ve learned belongs in a pot. It does *not* belong in the ground with other plants because *it will take over*. Such was the same with kudzu and such was the same with the mustard plant. If a farmer was smart, he would segregate his plants and keep his mustard *well* away from the other plants.

**What does it, then, mean to consider the Kingdom of God as a place where the unwanted are celebrated?** For example, there’s much rhetoric in this country that speaks disparagingly of immigrants with the same verbiage with which we speak of something like kudzu or the mustard plant. We hear about “hoards” of immigrants crossing the border. We’re told that they are an "invasive species” that exist to “take our jobs” and bring nothing but violence and crime. And yet, we know statistically speaking that immigrants have no higher rate of criminal behavior that any of the rest of us! And the Kingdom of God is like a mustard plant, where the unwanted are welcomed and the outcast are celebrated.

**Secondly, the mustard plant provided shade to birds and other creatures in need of shelter.** Shade was hard to come by in the arid climate of Jesus’ home. Every creature needs shelter Jesus must have observed that the mustard plants fulfilled that need.

As such, not only is Jesus saying that the Kingdom of God is for the unwanted, he’s also making a case about the work of the Church, the Body of Christ. It’s a place where the unwanted are welcome and each and every messy beloved child of God gathers to provide shelter for others. That’s the work of the Church, y’all. And sometimes those of us in positions of cultural privilege need to take a step back and realize that we are not intended to be the saviors of the unwanted but colleagues-in-ministry *with* them. It was not lost on me, spending this past week in Staten Island, that the majority of the people we worked with at Project Hospitality were first and second generation immigrants. From Gloria, the volunteer manager, to our work supervisors, Santiago and Placido, we were led by immigrants to do the work of feeding the hungry and providing mercy and compassion to those who struggle to feed themselves and their families.

The Kingdom of God, my neighbors, is like a mustard plant. It’s like kudzu! It’s like mint! It’s unexpected and confuses those in power! It’s stubborn, relentless, invasive, and abundant! It’s something beyond our control. The Kingdom of God isn't a mathematical formula to be calculated and solved but a mystery to be caught up in.

And so I’m reminded this day of this humbling truth: when I’m tempted to dismiss the marginalized and oppressed, I might as well be dismissing the Kingdom of God I preach so fervently. And I know I’m not the only preacher in this room. We are *all* preachers of the Kingdom of God! As such, may we hear these parables with new hearts, eager to provide shade for our neighbors!

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God’s children, say: **Amen.**