

The Second Sunday after Pentecost
Christ the Rock Ev Lutheran Church
Farmington, NM
June 18, 2017

Mark 4:26-34 He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. 27 Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. 28 All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. 29 As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

30 Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? 31 It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. 32 Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”

33 With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. 34 He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

“Surprisingly Organic”

A recent trip to the grocery store ended in surprise for me. I have to have lists. And my wife was kind enough to text me the items she needed me to bring home. So I was half-quadruple-checking my phone and half-scoping the grocery store aisles for the few fresh produce items on my texted list. Finding what I needed, I quickly scooped them into my basket and headed to the check out aisle. But when the prices flashed after each scanned vegetable, I almost went into shock. I thought the peppers would be a dollar or maybe a little more if they were out of season. But \$3 for each one! When I questioned the cashier, I was told my vegetables were all organic. In a rush for time, I decided to just pay the extra amount and hurry home. Not that I expected anyone to taste the difference. But if they had, I could told my family it was an investment in their longterm wellbeing, trying to protect them from harmful pesticides and questionable genetically modified seeds. But in reality, it was a mistake.

Before it became a hot-button issue in grocery store aisles, legislative chambers and farmers’ fields, organic meant something different. Simpler. Organic refers to the way something happens quite naturally, without a ton of outside help or forced effort. And in Mark chapter 4, Jesus wants us to think of spiritual growth that is surprising. It’s surprising because it doesn’t match our expectations or the usual standards for success in our world. But the growth of God’s kingdom is something that happens quite naturally, organically. Yet the success and results of that growth is far beyond our expectations, it is surprisingly organic.

Our grandparents and great-grandparents would never tolerate listening to us complain about how rough our 21st century lives are. They did, however, have an advantage over us in at least one sense. Their lives were much more tied to the earth. When you don’t get your meals from glass cases in grocery store aisles or drive through windows, your day to day

life is tied to what is coming from the dirt and what comes up because of rain and sunshine. So those previous generations just had a more natural, more organic understanding of how the natural world works.

And that understanding that became imprinted in them over time without the aid of textbooks or Google searches, would give them an advantage for appreciating so many of Jesus' parables. See, when Jesus wanted to teach a simple or a deep spiritual truth to the people crowding around him, he often reached for a comparison from nature. Understanding plants, animals, and how they grow was so common, it was nearly universal, even for city people at the time of Jesus.

Which brings us to the reason why Jesus told parables in the first place. Maybe you have heard that parables are earthly stories with a heavenly meaning. That's a good start. A little more precisely, we can think of them as extended metaphors. In other words, there is a story. But there is another level to the story than just the actions and characters and events of the story. And Jesus tells these parables to do more than just deliver information. By using these stories Jesus can get past some natural human defenses and really reach the heart in ways that might not have been possible if he had just come out and given them the facts. If you back up in Mark chapter four, right in the middle of the first parable, Jesus gets into all this. But for now it's important to realize Jesus uses parable to teach spiritual truths with an impact. Sometimes that impact is negative. Sometimes it's positive.

Today we are actually looking at two parables. Jesus uses two pictures from nature, from plants and the way they grow to teach about the kingdom of God. In the first one, Jesus says the kingdom of God is like seed being scattered on the ground. And if you have ever been the planter of any kind of growing thing, you know this can be the most frustrating part. You put the seed in the ground. You can make sure the conditions are just right. You take care of the things you can control. But the actual growing part, the seed cracking out of its dried up husk and shouting out a green sprout, that part is outside of your control.

It can be frustrating when you want your own flowers or fruit or vegetables. But it is downright agonizing when it comes to God's kingdom. I mean, you've done the part that you can control. You develop a relationship with someone. You get to know them and share important things with them. You talk about your faith. At work you're careful when and how you do it. With your family you can be more direct. With your kids and grandkids you make it plain how important this is to you. But nothing seems to take root. Day and night, you look for a little sprout of spiritual life, a dawning realization of a relationship with the Savior, yet there is nothing you can see.

So Jesus tells this parable for people like you and me. He wants us to know how God's kingdom grows and spreads, that it's not always the way we expect. Jesus explains: **"Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head."** (Mark 4:27,28) In other words, it happens organically.

Have you ever heard someone talk about their gardening and they get a little over the top? They describe it in almost mystical terms. But there is no mysticism involved. No magic incantations or crystals or hocus-pocus. You can study the science behind the geology and the pH balance and the weather models. But after that the growth just happens organically. That's how God's kingdom comes too. It happens simply through the preaching and teaching of Jesus. It doesn't go according to your program or expectations. For people like you and me who get frustrated with the lack of visible results or the slow pace of seeing anything, Jesus wants you to know his Word will bring success. Jesus will make it work. It's surprisingly organic.

And because our faith struggles don't end there, Jesus tells the follow up parable. Again he is teaching about God's kingdom. He uses a second comparison, another metaphor: **"It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth."** (Mark 4:31) We know God's kingdom comes through the teaching and preaching of Jesus. We know his Word works in human hearts. And even when we learn we need to be more patient and wait for God's results on God's timetable, we can't help but struggle with what we see. Sometimes what we actually see, can be a little disappointing to be honest.

I mean, you know God works. God works in human hearts through his word. But look around you. I know it's a Lutheran church, but I give you permission to react during a sermon. Look at the church. Plenty of room for more people to hear God's Word isn't there? And the people who are here, you love them like brothers and sisters in Christ. But for every person here, you can probably think of two people who could be here, should be here. And the folks who are here, none of us are exactly the most powerful or wealthy. Maybe the mayor and a few tycoons snuck in this morning. But I don't think so. And the guys standing up in front will probably never have his smiling face broadcast across national television or sell millions of books. Looks like a mustard seed kind of kingdom. So small it's almost insignificant.

Wouldn't it be great if we could go back to the time when God's kingdom was huge and powerful? When Jesus was getting started and things were really getting done. Remember when Jesus had all those chariots and cavalry? When he rolled into Jerusalem with tanks and bombarded Rome with heavy artillery? When he enlisted the bravest and the brightest recruits to carry out his can't-fail campaign? When Jesus developed his philosophy that was copied by the smartest and most influential people on the planet and his books made everyone wealthy and successful? No? That's not how it happened?

So the kingdom of God doesn't come, it doesn't work, it doesn't spread the way we expect conquerors and founders of movements to operate. In fact, the kingdom of God is so surprising, it's actually shocking. The kingdom of God got started when the infinite Lord of all took up residence for nine months in the uterus of a virgin. His movement really got started when he gathered around him a bunch of backwoods fishermen, a despised tax collector and a political extremist. He announced his arrival by associating with societal rejects and prostitutes, wasting time with people oppressed with afflictions and troubled by demons. And at the climax of his efforts, his life was snuffed out brutally on an instrument of torturous execution.

A lot like that mustard seed. Life could only come when Jesus was bruised. Power sprang to life when he was crushed. The kingdom fully came into existence only when Jesus sprang from the cold, dark tomb on Easter morning, sprouting above the surface into the sunlight. And only when Jesus returned to his throne in heaven, did his kingdom really take off.

That's when the good news of what Jesus did by his death and resurrection spread like wildfire from heart to heart. Jesus crushed for the frustration and impatience of our very earthly-minded expectations. Bruised for all our disappointments over what God is or isn't doing in our lives. God's kingdom kept growing and spreading through the faithful work of those humble fishermen and unworthy tax collectors. God's grace and forgiveness shared by those healed and drawn out of shameful lives. Like that tiny mustard seed, the good news of Jesus kept going and spreading to all the corners of the globe. The results of what Jesus did are magnificent for all people everywhere. People of every race and class and nation benefit beyond their wildest expectations. Everyone who believes in Jesus is part of that kingdom without borders. Through the gospel it happens surprisingly, organically.

Jesus describes the amazing results of that mustard seed. He says: **"Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade."** (Mark 4:32) Some day God will open your eyes to see it. People you harder your faith with. People you never gave up on no matter how bad the results looked. The people who used to sit next to you in church or just came that one time. God was at work. Babies were brought to this font and brought screaming into God's kingdom. Troubled sinners burdened by guilt-ridden consciences came to this altar and were joyfully given full and free forgiveness. Bibles were opened by people without deep, theological training and the seed planted took root, sprouted and brought amazing fruit for God.

It's surprising only in the simple, ordinary way it happened. Organically God worked through his Word and Sacraments. He worked in you. He worked through you. He still does. And some day we'll see that we are part of an amazing, majestic tree with a canopy for people of all kinds from every background, from every nation. It may have looked too simple. It may have started seemingly insignificantly. But God was at work. Jesus is at work to bring his amazing results. Amen.