

“From Small Seeds”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
12th Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 24, 2018

First Scripture Lesson: Psalm 23 (A Paraphrase by Toki Miyashiro)

The Lord is my Pace-setter, I shall not rush; He makes me to stop and rest for quiet intervals. He provides me with images of stillness, which restores my serenity. He leads me in ways of efficiency, through calmness of mind. And His guidance is my peace. Even though I have a great many things to accomplish each day I will not fret, for His presence is here. His timelessness, His all-importance will keep me in balance. He prepares refreshment and renewal in the midst of my activity by anointing my mind with His oils of tranquility. My cup of joyous energy overflows. Surely harmony and effectiveness shall be the fruits of my hours, For I shall walk in the pace of the Lord and dwell in His house forever.

Second Scripture Lesson: Mark 4:26-34

²⁶[Jesus] also said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

³⁰He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³²yet 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.”

³³With many such parables He spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴He did not speak to them except in parables, but He explained everything in private to his disciples.



Sermon: *From Small Seeds*

I hate cutting grass. Always have. Walking around in the hot sun pushing a gas-powered mower just isn't my idea of a good time. As a teenager, I thought my lot in life was the poorest of anyone I knew because I was expected to cut our yard, which was a tiny plot about the size of this chancel *for free!* Today I am a home owner and I recognize the necessity of regular lawn maintenance. Doesn't mean I enjoy it any more. I just realize that if I don't cut my grass and pull the weeds, they will take over my house. That's not just hyperbole, it is actually true.

In his book *The World without Us*,¹ author Alan Weisman imagines what would happen to the world if people were suddenly removed from it. Not if there was a nuclear apocalypse or a pandemic that wiped us all out, but if we just ... disappeared. One of the first things that would happen is that our environment would begin to reclaim the civilized world that we've carved out for ourselves. Without people around to mow the grass, spray for weeds, and keep the tree saplings and underbrush from taking over, they would - pretty quickly, too.

We spend millions every year on lawn and yard care products to try to tame the wilderness outside our front doors. Local and state agencies across the country struggle to keep tree limbs away from power lines and tree roots from blocking sewer pipes. In the south where I spent most of my life, kudzu vines cover just about anything they come across. It's not unusual to see telephone poles and whole stands of trees covered in blankets of kudzu.

But stop cutting and spraying and trimming back, and all of those sub-divisions and office parks and strip malls, and miles and miles of asphalt that we've come to know and love would slowly begin to turn back into the prairies and forests and wilderness that they were before humans first settled them. If we weren't here, there would be no one to stop seeds from sprouting in the cracks of roads and sidewalks. There would be no one to keep vines from pushing between brick and mortar joints. There would be no one to cut back the trees and shrubs as they sprouted right in the middle of your precious front yard, and the 18th green of your favorite golf course and right in the middle of I-270 for that matter.

We seem to live under the illusion that we are in control; that what we have built is permanent; that our civilization is somehow impervious to the unstoppable growth of living things. But Weisman shows us that it's not. That the slow and inexorable growth of plants may seem like nothing, but in reality it is an unstoppable force that if unchecked will gradually cover, and eventually erase everything that humanity has ever built. I got to thinking about Wiseman's book this week as I was reading this passage from Mark where Jesus tells two parables in which He compares the Kingdom of God to things that grow.

Now it's important to understand what Jesus is talking about when He teaches about the Kingdom of God. He talks about it more than almost anything else and many people have no idea what He meant by it ... including many of the people in His audience at the time. Remember, the Jews to whom Jesus was talking had, as their cultural heritage, a mighty empire ruled by David and his son Solomon. Parents passed stories on to their children of the glorious empire that blossomed in those years of the promised land - when they were not oppressed by foreign powers and when Israel was a nation of economic, military and political influence in the Mediterranean world.

So as the people reflected on Jesus' promises for the coming Kingdom of God, they imagined a return to what once was. They expected a new King to arise and lead a revolution. They expected a sudden explosion of God's Glory onto the scene, reversing the course of history, dramatically overthrowing the worldly and heathen powers of Rome in a flash and establishing God's reign on earth. Many of them thought Jesus had come to lead just such a revolution.

But here Jesus speaks of something far less dramatic. Yes, God will turn the earth into God's Kingdom where God's perfect will be done on earth as in heaven; a kingdom where the home of God will be among mortals; where God will dwell with us and all of the people will be God's people.²

Yes, God's Kingdom, is coming, but it will be a slow and incremental process, like the way your garden grows; like the way grasses and trees and vines and all manner of living things grow. You may not even know that change is happening until finally it is time for the harvest. That's a very different idea than the violent, sudden, total revolution that was such a part of the popular conscience. What Jesus describes is a far more deliberate process. The Kingdom of God will not be rushed.

Which is true of a lot of things. Wine, art, and barbecue (which, let's be honest, *is* art); those are all things that benefit from a patient hand. And while some believe in love at first sight, true love grows over time. The Supremes once famously sang "You can't hurry love; no, you'll just have to wait." The Kingdom of God will not be hurried either. It will not come in suddenly like a rushing tidal wave. It will grow gradually like a garden ... or a jungle. And its slow, incremental growth should not be mistaken for weakness. We can neither control nor fully understand its coming.

But then Jesus goes further and describes the Kingdom as a mustard seed. Now when I was young, my father had a tie tack that was a small acrylic bubble inside of which was a tiny mustard seed. He said it referenced the words of Matthew 17:20 in which Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of

a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.” Even a small amount of faith will help a Christian to be an effective disciple.

But in this passage from Mark, Jesus does not compare the faith of disciples to a mustard seed, but the very Kingdom of God itself. Here Jesus is again challenging the way his Jewish brothers and sisters have always understood God and God’s Kingdom. God’s Kingdom will not become a reality because of something big, like a seismic shift in world politics or an armed revolution. No, the beginnings of the Kingdom of God will be tiny.

“‘The mustard seed’ was a common metaphor in Palestine for ‘the smallest thing.’”³ Now it’s worth pointing out that the mustard seed is *not* the smallest of all seeds on the earth. Seeds of the orchid family are actually much smaller. They are like fine dust and can be as small as 1/300th of an inch long. Begonia seeds and petunia seeds are also smaller than the mustard seed.⁴ But Jesus is not a scientist, He is a teacher; an orator, and what He is trying to say is that God can use something small and seemingly inconsequential to do something *amazing*. Like the disciples.

In his book *Zealot*, Reza Aslan argues that the disciples were uneducated and unsophisticated. They were not just fishermen, they were outsiders who would have had almost no formal education in the scriptures. Yet they were being asked to volunteer to be the foundation on which Christ would build the church; they were being counted on to carry the message of the gospel out into the world. They were being counted on to stand against not only the power of the Jewish Temple authorities, which was no small thing, but against the power of the Roman Empire itself.⁵

But then God has always had a way of choosing unlikely people to tend the garden: Abraham and Sarah were beyond child-bearing years when God instructed them to start a family. David was the youngest and the smallest of his brothers when God chose him to be King. Mary was a virgin on the margins of society when God called her to bear a son who would save the world. And rather than pick the best and the brightest from among the temple authorities, God chose simple tradesmen and entrusted these 12 with a story and a mission.

Would you have thought so humble a group as the disciples would have been the beginnings of so widespread and influential an institution as the church of Jesus Christ? There are hundreds of churches in Columbus alone. And hundreds of thousands more around the globe. Millions of people are comforted and challenged by the gospel of Jesus Christ in every country on earth. And we are a part of that world-changing movement that traces its roots back to Jesus and 12 singularly unimpressive followers, in a small, inconsequential corner of the Roman Empire, over 2000 years ago. How could such a thing happen? When you get home today, take a chair out into your yard and sit for a while watching your grass grow and you’ll understand.

The Kingdom of God is here and yet it is not yet come to completion. We see bits and pieces of it everywhere: In moments of peace, in experiences of love and compassion; in moments where the “powers that be” reign in their own power to allow for the oppressed and the poor and the people Jesus called “The Least of These” to flourish. We see the inbreaking of the Kingdom in our own lives when we find hope and when we experience compassion and a second chance.

But God’s Kingdom is still growing. And like the garden that Jesus describes, the Kingdom grows when the people charged with tending it are led by the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, sometimes those charged with tending the garden do more to prevent its growth than they do to promote it.

God spreads tiny seeds hither and yon, all around us and these seeds are moments of opportunity; times when we encounter a stranger in need; times when we have the chance to share a smile with someone

we meet; times when we are given the opportunity to make a difference in a child's life; moments when we can choose to share some of our time with someone who is sick or alone or afraid. Every interaction with another person is a chance to tend seeds of the Kingdom. Every Facebook post, every Tweet, every text is a chance to tend the seeds of the Kingdom. When we interact with our friends and with strangers; with those who see the world as we do and those who see things through an entirely different set of lenses, those are opportunities to tend God's Kingdom and help it grow.

Watching grass grow is no fun. In fact, it is the epitome of boring. And when the world is as chaotic as it seems sometimes, we can find ourselves wishing that God would just hurry things up a bit. I remember a woman in Nicaragua who lived in one of the poorest barrios telling our group of seminary students that she believed Jesus was coming back, but she prayed every day that he would come soon. A sudden revolution; a dramatic turning of this world to God's will would be welcome.

We want it right now. Like our microwave popcorn, and super-fast internet and same-day delivery. Like almost everything else in our lives. But that's not how God chooses to work.

Which takes me back to Toki Miyashiro's re-imagining of the 23rd Psalm we read earlier

*The Lord is my Pace-setter, I shall not rush;
He makes me to stop and rest for quiet intervals.
He provides me with images of stillness, which restores my serenity.
He leads me in ways of efficiency, through calmness of mind.
And His guidance is my peace.*

God's Kingdom is coming, and we are tasked with waiting patiently for it. But in the waiting, we are called to help plant seeds and tend those that are already growing. When one person does the right thing - even if it is not in his or her best interest; when someone takes a risk; when someone chooses to forgive rather than hold a grudge; love rather than hate; make peace rather than war; these are the tiny seeds from which the Kingdom of God grows. They are found in opportunities to do God's will; to share God's love and to foster a community of loving-kindness and peace and mercy.

God's Kingdom emerges when these small seeds grow up into mature plants by the power and grace of God's Holy Spirit. Like the forests and wilderness from which we carved our civilization, the growth of God's Kingdom is mysterious and unrelenting. And as the hands to whom God has given the responsibility of tending these seeds, we have the choice to facilitate that growth, or get in its way. But let there be no doubt, the Kingdom of God will grow to its full completion. We have already seen its beginnings.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Weisman, Alan. *The World without Us*. New York: Thomas Dunne /St. Martin's, 2007. Print.

² Revelation 21:3, Paraphrase

³ Stroupe, Nibs. "Mark 4:26-34: Homiletical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word. Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Ed. David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown. Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008. 141+. Print.

⁴ "What Is the Smallest Seed in the World?" *Professor Olsen @ Large*. N.p., 22 June 2007. Web. 15 June 2015. <<https://diogenesii.wordpress.com/2007/06/22/what-is-the-smallest-seed-in-the-world/>>.

⁵ Aslan, Reza. *ZEALOT: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*. New York, NY: Random House, 2013. Print.