

**The Third Sunday after Pentecost – Mark 4:26-34**  
**St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Sedona Arizona**

*“The seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.”*

Back in elementary school, most of us probably learned about germination by planting a seed in a tiny paper cup filled with soil. Each day we lovingly gave it fresh water and made sure it received proper sunlight. Eventually little green leaves would sprout up because we created a nurturing environment for the seed to flourish. But have you ever seen little plants grow up out of cracks in the sidewalk and wondered how they got there? Somehow without much soil or water, the plant found a way to grow. At some point the seed broke open and roots started to grow. New cell growth developed at the tips of the plant's roots and sought a path to expand its root system through microscopic cracks in the surface of the concrete. Eventually, molecule by molecule, the plant's growth forced its way into the slab and created a surface crack.<sup>1</sup> This little plant will probably not survive for very long, but the fact that it grew where it did is simply amazing.

All of the instructions that were hidden inside the seed told it how to become a plant regardless of where it was sown. Botanists can tell us about plant life in highly technical scientific terms, but most would probably avoid comparing seed life to the kingdom of God.

The peasants who listened to Jesus' teachings had at least a rudimentary understanding about planting and harvesting. Even though they didn't explore the microscopic structure of plants, they knew how to nurture crops with rich soil, and how to protect them from hungry pests. They prayed to God for suitable weather

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<sup>1</sup> <https://liftrightconcrete.com/how-plants-cause-concrete-sidewalk-cracking%E2%80%8B/>

conditions for growing food, and gave thanks for abundant harvests. These agrarian communities lived so close the land they knew which seeds to sow freely and which ones to plant sparingly.

Farmers could relate to Jesus' seed parables because their lives were intimately connected to seed life and the land. They appreciated the distinctive qualities of each kind of seed. Wheat seeds would be sown and harvested and turned into flour for bread, and some varieties of mustard seed would be used as spice or medicine.<sup>2</sup> Both kinds of seeds brought nourishment and healing to their lives. But there were several things about Jesus' seed parables that were puzzling. In the parable of the growing seed, the sower scattered seed and rested until it sprouted and grew to full size. When the grain was ripe the farmer harvested his crop. But there was no mention of how much seed the farmer had to sow or where he got it. There was no mention of the farmer tilling the soil, and mixing in nutrients from compost or manure. There was no mention of how he protected his plantings from pests, or hungry birds and animals. The whole process of sowing seeds in Jesus' parable sounded effortless until harvesttime. Is that what the kingdom of God will be like? This image of the kingdom of God was a far cry from peasant lifestyle, especially since much suffering and chaos had sprouted up under imperial rule. Jesus' parable of the growing seed was optimistic, but given current social conditions it was rather unrealistic.

The parable of the mustard seed was even more confusing if not laughable. Who in their right mind would intentionally sow mustard seeds? The kind of wild mustard seed that grew in ancient Israel spread like weeds and took over soil that was intended for food crops.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2012/05/mark-4-30-32/>

Mustard shrubs were so ubiquitous that it was against the law to plant its seeds.<sup>3</sup> Sowing mustard seeds anywhere and everywhere sounded reckless and foolish. Is that what the kingdom of God is all about?

Parables can be annoying if we hear them as regular stories and interpret them literally. Ideally, parables can be thought provoking; they can nurture life-giving conversations, and prompt new ways of being. When heard with open minds, parables can help us imagine new possibilities. When heard with open hearts they can spark hope even in the most challenging of circumstances. Breaking open a parable is like breaking open a seed. Even the tiniest crack in the outer shell will allow new cell growth to develop, and new root systems to peek through, even in places that are dark and lonely; even in situations that are as inhospitable as thick dry concrete.

The mustard seed may grow into a wild shrub that is annoying for humans, but is also a place of refuge for birds and other creatures. Humans may find numerous uses for wheat, but other creatures may also find its stalks and grain to be beneficial for their lives. God created the world and all that is in it for sharing, for the development of healthy relationships, and for mutual flourishing.

In imagining what the kingdom of God is like, Jesus invites his followers into places of wonderment that nourish the soul, that germinate diverse ideas, and produce welcoming environments for living and growing as God's beloved community. But in order for seeds to germinate, cell walls must be cracked, and barriers broken through. The instructions that God implanted within seeds tell it how to seek nutrients from soil and water; how to locate places of least resistance and push through into the light. There is no *one way* for seeds to sprout, for each

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<sup>3</sup> <https://asermonforeversunday.com> Jim Somerville, B30.2 (2018)

seed shares space with other creatures above and below ground. Each seed must find its own way through cracks and crevices and into the beloved community of God's diverse creation.

In Leonard Cohen's famous Anthem, he sings:

“Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack, a crack in everything  
That's how the light gets in.”<sup>4</sup>

For human beings, the gift of heaven on earth is revealed not when we try to create perfectionist lifestyles or personal utopias. God's kingdom is revealed when we acknowledge and celebrate our interconnectedness with all that is; when we crack open hearts that have turned hard as concrete; when we break through walls of stubbornness; when we shed light on our shadow selves; when we seek possibilities for new life beyond our protective shells. Beyond our gated communities. Beyond our comfortable houses of worship. Beyond our preconceived ideas of who other people are, especially those who don't look, or think, or act as we do.

In his book, *Jesus for Farmers and Fishers*, Gary Paul Nabhan shares how Jesus often brought together people from diverse backgrounds, and helped germinate new perspectives on who they were in God's eyes and in God's kingdom here on earth, right now. He writes:

“Jesus did not recruit his disciples by carefully selecting them through job interviews at an employment agency. He found them in the bottoms of boats smelling of fish slime and in the shadows on the rough edge of town. . . His followers included dozens of dirt farmers, scrappy fishers, edgy outcasts, clandestine zealots, recovering tax

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BCS\\_MwkWzes](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BCS_MwkWzes)

collectors, abandoned women, and hapless harvesters with short-handled hoes. Jesus took all of them, even the one who betrayed him. He did not simply sow his words into the ‘seedbed of the elite’ where highly educated scribes and rabbis might receive them. Instead, he seeded his messages on the margins of society, in some of the poorest social substrates in all of Galilee.”<sup>5</sup>

Jesus knew that each of these people could learn from the other about how God’s love breaks through the perceived imperfections of their lives and recognizes them as holy and beloved. Each of these people could scatter new seeds that offer glimpses of God’s heavenly kingdom in the here and now. Seeds of hope that encourage one another through difficult times. Seeds of forgiveness that transform lives through acts of healing and reconciliation. Seeds of compassion for the sick, generosity for the hungry, justice for the oppressed, and hospitality for the marginalized. Seeds of God’s grace that value people for who they are instead of for what they can produce. Seeds of love that help usher in God’s kingdom always and everywhere, for everything and everyone.

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<sup>5</sup> Gary Paul Nabhan. *Jesus for Farmers and Fishers: Justice for all Those Marginalized by our Food System*. Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books (2021), 42-43.