

Second Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 6) – Year B – June 14, 2009
1 Samuel 15:34-16:13; Psalm 20; 2 Corinthians 5:6-17; Mark 4:26-34
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“He showed me a little thing the size of a hazelnut, in the palm of my hand....I looked at it ... and I thought, “What can this be?” And answer came, “It is all that is made.” So says, Dame Julian of Norwich in *The Revelations of Divine Love*. She is describing God’s love and God’s grace revealed in a seemingly lifeless seed. In first century Palestine, everyone who walked through a field of grain would praise God and marvel at the miracle of life from dust. Nowadays, you and I might occasionally walk through a field, and if we give it a moment’s thought, we would probably think ‘biological event’. And that’s okay. It’s good to have a deeper understanding of science and nature. We simply have to remember Who created the heavens and the earth in the first place, because without the dirt of the ground that we take entirely for granted, there would be no crops at all.

Today’s Gospel reading is much more than two stories about God’s kingdom. It is more than just parables about seeds growing, the earth producing of itself, and a mustard bush that becomes as big as a tree. Today’s parable is a message ripe with possibility. There is trust and faith in God’s grace. There is God’s steadfast love, and the gift of hope for our future in Christ Jesus our Lord. And before we are through today, we will also learn another deeply important lesson, one that is encapsulated in this marvelous reading.

Mark begins with someone scattering seed on the ground. In this and other parables, the seed is usually understood as the Word of God, which means that God needs our help at least in plowing the ground, and planting the seeds in the hearts of others. Then there is the image of scattering on the ground. No farmer would waste valuable seed in that kind of profligate way, and that’s precisely the point. The Greek word for ground tells us that this is the scattering of God’s Word across the whole earth, not some confined agricultural pursuit. It reflects our God of abundance and grace – that everyone has the opportunity to receive God’s Word. What then? We may be tempted to think that we are the ones responsible for growing the seeds. However, the parable tells us that the miracle of growth rests entirely in God’s hands. In fact, the story says that we sleep and rise, night and day throughout the whole period, and that growth occurs in stages – not all at once. We wouldn’t expect a baby to stand up and walk without first learning how to hold her head up, and crawl. It is who we are, and our Creator honors our humanness, respects our need to learn and grow, work and rest, and our need to play. You and I do our work in scattering the Word everywhere. The Holy Spirit is ever knocking on hearts; ready to enter in with God’s transforming love. In His grace, God grants the miracle of faith and bring us to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit prompts the seeds to new life in the hearts of all who have heard the Word of God and believe. Just as the earth produces of itself silently, God powerfully fulfills the promise of salvation.

Jesus is not just some kernel of Truth. He is the way, the truth and the life. He is the perfect revelation of God, and the perfect example of the fullness of humanity. He comes so that you and I, and all creation might be reconciled to God, and to live more fully into our humanity. After Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension, He sends the Holy Spirit to dwell within us as our advocate, teacher and guide in all Truth, so that we might continue His work in and to the world. And so we must always ask ourselves the question: “What seeds am I sowing in my being and doing?” Are they seeds of love or fear; greed or giving; peace or hatred; joy or jealousy? Jesus sowed seeds of eternal life, healing, and salvation. As disciples of the Lord, those are the seeds you and I must also sow into the world. The Good News of God’s grace is planted through His kingdom in the whole of creation. Closer to home, we saw it this past week in the joy of more than thirty children’s faces learning about the Lord, and singing praises to His name. It is visible in the abundant spiritual gifts of this community – practicing God’s graciousness in all we do, and sharing God’s love as we reach out to those who are in need. Look with the eyes of your heart, and see how God is working in this community of faith. The kingdom of God is here.

It may sound strange for us to talk about God's kingdom. Even though we know Christ the King to be the ruler, how are we supposed to relate to this mysterious kingdom of God while we await His coming in glory? What forces are at work here? Every one of us is all too familiar with the "bitter reality of unfettered power" in the world (Ivone Gebera). Is God's kingdom really different? Let's turn now to the mustard seed. Mustard only grows into a bush, and yet in Mark's account we are told that the mustard seed grows into a great tree that shelters all the birds of the air. For the first hearers of the Word, this would not be too much of a stretch in their imaginations – more so for you and me. Jesus is actually comparing a mustard bush with the much-coveted great cedar trees. Parables are meant to be understood at many levels, and the reference to the cedar tree is a comparison to the world tree of imperial rule. In Jesus' time that was, of course, the imperial rule of the Roman Empire. The mustard tree of God's kingdom shelters all the birds of the air. God's saving grace in Jesus Christ extends to all the nations of the world. God's kingdom is completely different from worldly powers. Rome *sought* to enforce peace through violence and oppression. God *grants* peace through His grace, in humility, love and service to others.

In terms of Mark's account of God's kingdom, we see the mustard bush becoming a great tree of God's kingdom. It is a symbol of God replacing the powers of the world. But we also see that the mustard bush is humble in size compared to a cedar tree. It is another mystery. God's kingdom is not just a new oppressive regime, but just the opposite whereby believers gain true freedom in Christ. In fact, the mustard bush is an excellent analogy for God's kingdom. Jesus has ushered in a rule of life that teaches us a better way than the world's way. The quality of power under God's rule *is* different. It is power that empowers. It is a way of life that eagerly and unselfishly seeks the benefit of all other people, and living things. The miracle of the seed that comes to life is just like the miracle of transformation in the life of a believer. All who learn to participate and practice God's teaching about real power -- the power that is found in humility and service to others -- will know true freedom. In mutuality, empathy and support, you and I are empowered by God to create a more just and peaceful world. A world that looks less like hierarchical rule and inequality, and more like God's new world where the dignity and equality of every human being is honored. God's kingdom is one where God's love and justice reigns. All have enough, not too little and not too much. No one is poor, hungry or in need. When we accept the sustaining food of God's grace, we can feed the whole world.

This week at Vacation Bible School, a group of amazing volunteers came and shared their gifts. They each fed the children of this community both literally and spiritually with God's love. The theme was trekking, and on Thursday morning, we trekked to the upper room to learn how Jesus loves us and how He wants us to serve others. Two of us washed the feet of the children that morning. I can't speak for Jan, but as I washed, wiped, and told them how much Jesus loves them, I looked in their eyes and saw the kingdom of God. I saw the mystery of seeds beginning to grow, new life and hope. As Julian once saw in a hazelnut, I saw in those children all that God has made – the miracle of abundant life in Christ Jesus our Lord. And you know what? In your faithfulness and trust in God, in all that you do in His service, I see all that God has made in each of you as well. The mystery of God's love is transforming our lives, growing hope and joy right here. Our God truly is an awesome God.

Amen.