

June 13, 2021

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Mark 4:26-32

Sowing Seeds

The author of Psalm 8 expresses awe at the majesty of God's creation. "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?"

One can't help but be amazed and astounded by the created order and we would have to include the earth along with the sun and the moon and the stars as an amazing part of creation. God created the world in such a way that the earth has incredible power to bring forth life and to regenerate. We get a taste of it each spring when the natural world bursts with life after being snow-covered and dormant all winter.

I'm sure many of you have seen the images of the way the earth was able to regenerate during the pandemic. As a result of the lack of human activity and resulting pollutants, the murky water in the canals in Venice became so clear you could see fish deep below the surface. Very rare leatherback sea turtles were able to return to empty beaches in Thailand and lay their eggs. Due to the lack of air pollution, residents in Punjab, India were able to see the Himalayan Mountains for the first time in decades.

The earth has this incredible capacity to bring forth life and to regenerate. Not only do we benefit from it, not only does the earth sustain our very lives, but we actually have a role to play in it. Jesus refers to that role in our two parables today. In the first, he 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..."

The second parable begins, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?" The answer provided is that it's like a mustard seed which someone sows on the ground. Eventually, it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs.

What these two parables have in common is that someone sows seeds, waits, and then something wonderful comes of it. I want to suggest that we've been placed in this amazing, life-creating, regenerating world and we get to participate. Basically, we have one task. Our task is to plant seeds. If our parables today are an indication, it's true in the physical world and in the spiritual life.

In his book *First Things First*, author Stephen Covey describes what he calls the Law of the Farm. He describes what those of us who have gardens and those who have spent time on a farm know very well. In agriculture, natural laws and principles govern the work and determine the harvest.

Covey explains when it comes to growing flowers or vegetables or anything else, you can't cram. There's a time for preparing the soil. There's a time to get the seeds in the

ground. Then, you wait. He writes, “Can you imagine “cramming” on the farm? Can you imagine forgetting to plant in the spring, flaking out all summer, and hitting it hard in the fall – ripping the soil up, throwing in the seeds, watering, cultivating – and expecting to get a bountiful harvest overnight?”

The point is that cramming doesn’t work in a natural system like the farm or even our gardens and I would suggest, based on our two parables, it doesn’t work in the spiritual life either.

Apparently, the same principles that govern life on the farm pertain to the realm of God as well. In fact, the point Stephen Covey makes is that the Law of the Farm governs all aspects of life. Cramming just doesn’t work in so many situations.

I can’t decide I’m going to run a marathon on Saturday, go out and run 16 miles a day between now and then, and expect to be ready. Believe me; that won’t work! Think about raising kids. You can’t slack off as a parent during the middle school and high school years, then two months before they graduate and leave home decide to instill discipline and good judgement. We can’t cram when it comes to building character. Here at the church, we want to have a robust Rally Sunday and regathering in September, but Pastor Dan and I can’t just show up to the office on the morning after Labor Day and put it all together. We’re planning and making decisions now in order to have robust kickoff in the fall.

My original thought with this sermon was to rename the Parable of the Mustard Seed and call it the Parable of the Transforming Soil. That’s what we’re really talking about. It’s the power of the earth itself, along with warmth and light from the sun and rain from the sky that make growth possible.

A seed is just a bundle of potential. A seed can’t do anything until it is placed in the ground. It needs the soil to receive moisture and nutrients. But it takes time. I can’t plant seeds in my garden today and expect to have a salad with delicious lettuce and cucumbers tomorrow. I can’t force the seed to grow. I can’t impatiently hurry it along. You have to commit to the process.

Now, there’s no question there are pressing concerns in our world that scream out for bold action. The environmental challenge we face, for example, may require big immediate changes. But if it’s true that the Law of the Farm governs all aspects of life, we need to be willing to plant some seeds of change.

I think there are a lot of us who want to make changes in our lives. We want things to be different. Do you want to mend a strained relationship with a family member? Start with a small gesture. Send a card. Bring yourself to say the two words “I’m sorry.” Maybe you want to be more socially responsible, but you don’t know how to go about it. Read one book. Have a coffee with one person from whom you can learn. Maybe you want to change the dynamic in your love life. Surprise your special someone with something simple: flowers, a hidden note. Maybe there’s a way in which you want this church to grow or change. Float an idea. Find one other person and begin to make it happen.

We live in a world where amazing things are possible. Those amazing things tend to start with a seed. Take one little step. Decide to do one small thing: a kind gesture, a surprise contact, a subtle change in your routine. Plant a seed. Be patient and see what God can do with it.

Jesus described the realm of God as “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.”

What a beautiful image! The realm of God is like a great shrub where all kinds of birds can find shelter in its branches. And the great thing about the kingdom of God as opposed to the kingdoms of this world, is that it can emerge anywhere. The realm of God has no borders. There are no flags. There is no official language. It can take hold anywhere someone decides to scatter seeds of love and joy and compassion.

When I was kid, I had to go to church and to Sunday School every week. My dad was the minister. It didn't matter how I felt. There was no baseball or soccer on Sunday morning for me. Every time I complained, my mom's response was, “Young man, get your church clothes on and get yourself ready to go.” I didn't appreciate it at the time, but my mom understood something about planting seeds.

When I went away to college, my parents couldn't make me go to church. Like many young people do, I got away from it during those first couple years. Do you know what? I didn't completely leave it behind. The teachings of Jesus, the love I experienced in the community, the feeling of being part of something larger than myself, and the values I learned were seeds that took hold within me.

When my life was turned upside down and my mom died in my senior year of college, I relied on the church community to get me through it. I fell back on what I learned in my Sunday school classes and in youth group. I'm sure my parents were disappointed during my first years of college, but they planted the seed and trusted the process.

I'm grateful for all the seed planters who came before me. I'm grateful for all the seed planters today with the patience to take one little step.

The kingdom of God is like someone who went forth and scattered seed on the ground. God's realm is not of human origin. We don't build it. We don't control it. Our task is to plant, be patient, and watch what God can do.

