

The Mysterious Growth of the Mustard-Seed Kingdom

A Sermon for Every Sunday, Pentecost 4B

Mark 4:26-34

When I was in seminary I took a beginning Greek class that everybody called “Baby Greek.” But it was not for babies. Along with all the other students in the class I struggled to learn the original language of the New Testament, with all its strange letters and sounds, its difficult verbs and complicated conjugations. One of my fellow strugglers was a guy named Kevin who sat just across the aisle.

When Kevin and I ended up serving churches in the same county we sometimes shared the ride to seminary and talked about our work. I had been called as pastor of the First Baptist Church of New Castle, Kentucky, the county seat, while Kevin—through no fault of his own—had ended up at a church in the county’s armpit. He worked hard. He was a good preacher. He visited the sick and went to all the deacons’ meetings. But in spite of his best efforts that church did not grow. Week after week he looked out over a congregation of a few dozen people, and on the way to seminary he would share his disappointment.

I told him it wasn’t his fault. The town he was in had once been prominent. It was at the end of the railroad line and in the days when railroads carried passengers and not just cargo to his town people had stayed in the big hotel on Main Street and shopped in the many stores. But now his town was at the end of the line in more ways than one. The hotel had been boarded up, the streets and the shops were empty. No wonder the pews of his church weren’t filled up on Sunday morning. But all the explanations in the

world didn't take away the disappointment he felt every time he stepped into the pulpit and saw all those empty pews looking back.

And then a miracle occurred: Kevin was called to another church, a much larger church in a neighboring county. I didn't see him nearly as often after that but one day he made it a point to drive to my house so we could ride in to seminary together. On the way he told me what it was like to preach to a congregation of three or four hundred people on Sunday morning with a big choir (in robes!) sitting there behind him. He told me about all the programs they had at his church, and all the young couples and families who were coming to take advantage of them. He told me how the people had responded to his preaching, and how they might have to expand the parking lot soon. I have to say that I was genuinely happy for him, especially after all the disappointment he had suffered in his previous church, but then, just before he got out of my car, he said this: "Jim, if you want to grow your church, you've got to love your people."

And I was offended.

I wasn't offended because it isn't true—a pastor does have to love people—but because Kevin, who had struggled unsuccessfully for years to make a church grow, now pretended to have the secret of success, and whereas before his ministry had been marked by an earnest humility there was now this other thing, this *hubris* (to use a good Greek word): an arrogance, a pride, that I found unbecoming in a minister. But then I find a lot of that sort of thing among the church growth "experts." In my research for this sermon I found a comment from a pastor who said that his church had recently gotten involved in a program that described eight essential qualities of healthy churches and promised (with 99.4% certainty!) that every congregation that scores at least 65 in all eight categories

will be a growing church. It reminded me of the absolute certainty with which one of my seminary textbooks stated that the ratio between parking and people is 1:1.75. In other words, a church must have one parking place on the lot for every 1.75 people it expects to have in the pews.

All of this can make someone like me believe that if I only love my people, and if my church scores a 65 or higher in the eight essential categories, and if it has adequate parking for every person who might want to come, then my church will grow, but it can also make someone like me believe that if I'm doing everything the experts recommend and my church doesn't grow, then there must be something wrong with me.

I have a friend who used to serve a church in Dallas, Texas. It was one of those churches that had its heyday back during the fifties but by the time my friend arrived a congregation that had once numbered in the thousands had dwindled to just a few hundred. He said that every Sunday, when he stood in the pulpit of that cavernous sanctuary, he felt "mocked" by the empty pews. He read every book on church growth he could find, did most of the things those books suggested, attended seminars led by "successful" pastors (like my friend Kevin), but in the end he couldn't seem to make the church grow—no matter how much he loved the people—and it was some of those same people who decided they should start looking for someone who could.

I wish those people had read this parable from Mark 4:26-29, where Jesus says:

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, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come (*NRSV*).

What I love about this parable is that line in verse 27: “He does not know how.” The farmer can scatter the seed, but he cannot cause it to germinate and grow. In fact, in those primitive times the science of seed germination was a mystery to him. He just knew that if he threw a seed down on some freshly tilled ground, and if the rains would come and the sun would shine, that seed would grow. So, once he scattered the seed he could go up and sit on the porch, take a nap in the shade. He could eat his supper, wash the dishes, and go to bed. He might get up the next morning and look out at the field to see if anything was growing yet, but of course it wasn’t. These things don’t happen overnight. But eventually—eventually—the growth would come. He would see the brown field turn bright green with the tender shoots of new plants. He would see those shoots become stalks and those stalks grow heavy with grain. Ask him how it worked and he would shrug his shoulders. “I don’t know,” he would say, but when it was time to harvest the grain he would make short work of it: cutting the stalks, binding the sheaves, and bringing them in.

Jesus says the Kingdom of God is like that, and I think he means the growth of the Kingdom is like that. It’s a mystery. Like the farmer there is nothing we can do to make it grow and like the farmer we might be wise to admit that we don’t know how it works. Look at his role in this parable: he scatters seed, he sleeps and rises, he puts in the sickle. He has everything to do with the planting, everything to do with the harvesting, but nothing to do with the growing. That’s God’s business. And so, relieved of the anxiety of trying to make the seeds grow through his own efforts he can “lie down and rise up,” counting on God to do God’s part. What a relief for my friend in Texas, who thought the growth of the church was up to him, and what an important lesson for that congregation,

still searching for his successor: it is we who scatter the seed; it is God who gives the growth.

If that's true, then I would think that we would want to scatter seed all the time, and like the parable of the sower that Jesus tells in this same chapter, I would think that we would scatter it everywhere, since the soil we are throwing it on is the soil of the human heart, and since you can never tell where God might cause the seed to grow. If we fall for any church growth strategy let's fall for that one: a strategy of sharing the gospel generously, scattering its seed recklessly, and trusting God to give the growth. But remember this: that while you can plant a wheat seed and expect wheat to come up, while you can plant a kernel of corn and expect corn to come up, when you plant the seed of the Kingdom you never know what might come up.

Let me give you some background:

One of the alternate readings for this Sunday is from Ezekiel 17, where God says that he himself will take a sprig from the top of a tall cedar tree and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. "On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it," he says, "in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind." He seems to be talking about the kingdom of David, the same David who was just a shepherd boy in the story from 1 Samuel. As you recall David's kingdom was established, enlarged, divided, conquered, and eventually carried off into captivity. But now, after all these years, that kingdom is going to be restored, God says. It is going to become a noble cedar, growing on the mountain height of Israel, and birds will build their nests in it. Can't you imagine God's people loved that promise? And don't you think they kept that

image always in their minds, the image of a huge cedar tree growing on the top of Mount Zion?

Keep it in your mind as you hear the second parable in our Gospel reading for today, from Mark 4:30-32:

Jesus said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is 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" (*NRSV*).

It's funny, isn't it? Here is this image of the restored Kingdom of David becoming an enormous cedar tree in which the birds of the air can nest. You would expect Jesus to say that the coming Kingdom of God is going to be even bigger than that—a giant redwood you could cut a tunnel through—but instead he says the Kingdom is like a mustard seed, the smallest of all the seeds on earth. And yet, he says, "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." In other words, the Kingdom of God, when it is fully grown, is like...a bush! And not the biggest of all bushes at that. The wild mustard plant that grows in Israel is not all that remarkable, but it is everywhere. I've seen it myself, its yellow flowers visible in the fields and along the roadside. In Jesus' time it was against the law to plant mustard because it's the kind of weed that can take over your garden if you're not careful, and if you were foolish enough to throw the seed around it could take over the world.

Is that the point Jesus is making? Is he saying that if you take the seed of the Kingdom and scatter it around it will grow all right, but not in the way you expected? That instead of becoming one giant cedar with its top in the heavens, it will become a

million little mustard plants, scattered across the landscape? Maybe he's making a joke when he says that it will put forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can build nests in its shade. Maybe that's his way of causing everyone to picture the kingdom of David, just so he can grab that picture by the frame and turn it upside down. "You want a kingdom?" he asks. "I'll give you a kingdom. I'll give you a mustard-seed kingdom, running rampant in the world, growing everywhere, all the time, completely out of control."

Out of our control, that is. Because that's how we are with growth. We like to control it. We like to measure it. We like to talk about increasing our average weekly worship attendance by ten percent over six months. We like to count the number of parking spaces and multiply them by one-point-seven-five. But Jesus will have none of that. "Scatter the seed of the gospel," he says, "and then go take a nap, because growth is a mystery, and if you think you can understand it you're wrong. Sow the seeds of the Kingdom," he says, "and then step back, because the thing you expect to come up probably won't be the thing you get." It is hubris of the worst kind to think we can predict the outcome of our Kingdom efforts, to draw up charts and tables, to plot tidy points on a graph. Growth is God's business. When it comes and how it comes has never been up to us. Our business, apparently, is to scatter and sow the seed. That's what the farmer does in that first parable: he scatters the seed. And that's what happens in that second parable: the mustard seed is sown. *Sown*, I tell you! The seed of this weed, this nuisance, is thrown down onto the ground deliberately. Maybe that's a lesson for us, and for all churches everywhere: that instead of sitting in here trying to unravel the mysteries of growth, plotting our strategies for increase, making plans to expand the

parking lot, we should be out there scattering the seed of the Kingdom, because the truth is that if you hold a seed in your hand it will never grow, but if you throw it out there in the world...who knows what might happen?

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