

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

Psalm 20

2 Corinthians 5:6-10,[11-13],14-17

Mark 4:26-34

When our children were little we lived quite a long distance from either set of grandparents and travel was difficult and expensive, so we were lucky if we got to see them once a year. Invariably, each time we showed up the comments would start about how much the children had grown. “Put a book on his head!” my Mother would say. Or “freeze her just the way she is...she’s perfect” my husband’s mother would tell us. We all marvel at how fast children grow. And we are fascinated by that growth. And when the children are really tiny, it seems like we get a brand new little person every few weeks! Growth itself is a powerful phenomenon.

When we meet up with Jesus this morning in the Gospel of Mark, he is telling two parables to his followers: one about growth itself and the other about the nature of the kingdom of God. Jesus uses vegetation to make his point. He’s talking to people who are quite familiar with plants...all kinds of plants. His is an agrarian community full of sheep and shrubs. But we are all pretty familiar with plants ourselves...particularly this time of year as we fight to keep the never-ending weeds from taking over every inch of ground we have. Weeds seem to grow faster and stronger than anything else.

Jesus says the kingdom of God is as if someone had scattered seed on the ground and then gone off and left it alone. The one who scatters the seed sleeps and wakes and he can see the seed sprouting, but he has no idea how that happened and he certainly didn’t do anything to cause it. That seems to be the point of the first parable. The one who plants the seed is not the one who creates the plant or causes it to grow. God is the creator and God is the source of the power to make it grow. That fact alone made me think about the growth of my own children... who are a little different from plants (most of the time!) but created by God and God was the one who caused them to grow. When I thought about my children in this light, I had to take a step back and look at my role as a mother and my husband’s role as a father. We parents do have a role, of course, and it’s a very important role. But it’s probably not as powerful a role

as I had originally thought. I was the incubator before the children got here. After they got here, my husband and I assumed our job as parents: to love them and feed them and teach them and occasionally rinse them off with a little water. Their health and welfare were our responsibility, but we didn't create them. God did. And in raising them, we didn't have the power to make them be one way or another. Each one got here with a distinct personality and temperament. And each one grew at a pace that was unique to them and determined by God.

As mothers and fathers we have the privilege of being with these children daily and watching them unfold before our very eyes. Most of the time, it's a very fulfilling experience, but sometimes it's just plain confusing and frustrating. Much to our own dismay, we often find that we're not as powerful as we think we are. We can feed them. We can love them. We can educate them. We can discipline them. We can pray over them. We can cry over them. We can do almost anything and everything we can think of to improve their life...but no matter how hard we try...we can't make 'em bloom. That's a power that belongs only to God and God will make that happen when and if the time is right. The bad news is, if we can't make them bloom then we also can't take the credit for whatever their accomplishments might turn out to be. Those belong to them and to God. The good news is, if we can't take credit for the accomplishments then we aren't responsible when they mess something up either. That belongs just to them!

While Jesus is explaining about the whole phenomenon of growing, he also adds a parable about the kingdom of God being like a mustard seed. That little tiny seed holds within its genetic make-up all that is required to make a gigantic shrub...so big, in fact that it puts out large branches and the birds can make their nests in its shade. The mustard seed is one of the most prolific and one of the sturdiest seeds ever despite the fact that it's among the smallest. Great things very often come in small packages. There was a time in Israel when it was against the law for anyone to intentionally plant a mustard seed because the shrubs grew so fast, were so hardy and so large, that they took over everything. They were a nuisance. They were considered weeds. And yet, Jesus says, that's what the kingdom of God is like...is something

very tiny, but when set in motion, when its potential is unleashed...it can grow fast and become large and take over everything.

Can you imagine what would happen if the kingdom of God took over the world? Well, that's what we often refer to as heaven. And it would be, heaven on earth. But that little tiny mustard seed of hope and of love lies within each one of us just waiting to burst forth. We can't provide the growth, but we can be the earth that nourishes that little seed. We can till the soil by reading the scriptures and talking to and listening to others who are followers of Christ. We can be sure that the little seed gets enough water in worshiping in community and proclaiming the Good News to others. Some little plants just die out because they don't get watered often enough. We can make sure that the little plant of love and hope gets enough sunshine by generating laughter and good times and feelings of love with those around us. Laughing is a very bonding experience and is physically beneficial as well. Just ask a doctor...or a psychiatrist. We can make sure it gets the fertilizer and nutrients it needs to grow well by being in conversation in prayer...as Jesus says...all the time...without ceasing. We can keep the insects away by deflecting anything or anybody that would fill us with negative thoughts or feelings. We can do all these things to nurture that little seed of love and hope just as mothers and fathers do to nurture those little people that God has entrusted to them.

The one thing we can't do is provide the growth. That's a power that is beyond us. That is a power that belongs only to God and will be unleashed in God's own good time and according to his will and design. But just imagine what a world in which the kingdom of God was growing like a weed!!!

We can't make that happen, but we can work toward it and we can be ready for it. We can nurture and study and worship and pray and laugh and listen. Like a good mother and a good father, we can provide all that we know to do to nurture the kingdom in ourselves and in others, but the growth itself is up to God. Just imagine, though, what the world would be like if the kingdom of God took it over!

Thanks be to God. AMEN.