

Third Sunday after Pentecost

June 13, 2021

Who's in Charge?

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

Psalm 20

2 Corinthians 5:6-17

Mark 4:26-34

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 seeds on the ground and then gone off and left them 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. After they were born, 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 are 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 their accomplishments then we aren't responsible for their mistakes or bad judgement either. Those belong just to them! Thank goodness!

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...it 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 and of faith 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.

So what is that little seed? It's the smallest of things we do for others that build them up and leave them feeling loved and heard and affirmed. That's what the kingdom of God is all about...that we should all feel loved and heard and affirmed. Those tiny little seeds that we plant to foster the kingdom of God are things we rarely think of as life-changing or earth-shattering. Those little seeds are the smile we give to a total stranger even if we don't speak. They are the phone call we make to someone we know is lonely. They are the note we write to a shut-in. They are the ride we give to someone with no transportation. They are the welcome we offer to the visitor at our worship service. They are the applause we give to someone whose accomplishment we appreciate...or someone whose effort we admire. They are the hug we give to someone to express our affection for them. These little seeds are the shoulder we offer for someone else to cry on or maybe just sitting down next to someone we know is lonely. Such are the gestures that are the seeds we plant to help build the Kingdom of God. Those little tiny seeds have the ability to grow into enormous shrubs of care and affection. And they can change another person's life.

We can till the soil that will receive these seeds by reading the scriptures and talking to and listening to others who are followers of Christ. We can be sure that the little seed of faith 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. Faith can die out as well if it isn't nourished. 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 the little plant of faith 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 who would fill us with negative thoughts or feelings. We can practice all these things and nourish them within our own church family and then we can take them out into the world to spread the Good News...and the good 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 would be like!!! We can't make that happen, but we can work toward it and we can be ready for it. We can nurture the little seed of faith...about the size of a mustard seed... 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!

And when we think about our church family and pray for its growth, we need to remember that we need to be prepared to provide all the nourishment...the worship, the friendliness, the welcome, the Bible study, the fellowship, the prayer life, the friendships...that contribute to growth and make growth possible. But God will be the one to decide what the growth will be and when it will be and under what circumstances it will be. This is God's creation and God will determine the health and growth just as God does for all God's creation. We just need to be sure that we've tilled the soil, provided the nutrients, sprinkled the water and planted the seed.

The rest is in God's merciful hands. After all, God's the one in charge!

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.