

Year B Proper 11 “The Greatest of Shrubs” Mark 4 26 to 34

Thanks, Captain Obvious. I’m sure you’ve heard that saying many times over. Perhaps you’ve even had your moment of being Captain Obvious...when you’ve said something so clearly true that it didn’t need to be said – like when someone comes in from the rain and you say, “You’re wet.” Really? I hadn’t noticed. Thanks, Captain Obvious.

That’s what you could say to me today if I told you that, in the story of the mustard seed, we learn that “great outcomes arrive from small beginnings” or “big things start small” or something along those lines. Jesus started with 12 disciples and now he has millions of followers around the world. The church began with a few people in Israel and now it’s in nearly every country on earth. Sure, those things are true...but they’re also really obvious, so obvious that I’d bore you if I had nothing else to say.

There must be more to this parable than that. Actually, we know there is more to this parable than the obvious because the gospel reading tells us there is. We hear today that Jesus spoke to the people in parables, “he did not speak to them except in parables,” we are told. “But he explained everything in private to his disciples.” He explained everything in private to his disciples...So, we know there is more to this story than meets the eye because the disciples had to have it explained to them.

If we are going to learn the “more than meets the eye” bit from Jesus’ stories such as this one that tells us the kingdom of God is like sowing seeds and, in particular, like a mustard seed, we need to first understand a little bit more about mustard seeds and about God’s kingdom.

First, the mustard seed... The parable says it is the smallest of seeds. It isn’t the smallest of seeds – orchids and cypress seeds are smaller – but maybe it is the smallest seed that the people Jesus was talking to would want to sow. Perhaps Jesus was simply wanting to point out that the mustard seed is very small. Although other Gospels mention a mustard *tree*, Mark is more accurate in calling it a *shrub*. The mustard plants which Jesus and his listeners would have been

familiar with, grow – at most – to be about eight or ten feet tall. This mustard is quick growing, it needs very little care yet multiplies like dandelions and spreads out like raspberry bushes. It really looks more like a tangled mess of shrubbery rather than anything like a tree. Interestingly, mustard is an annual plant – growing abundantly then dying at the end of the season and reseeding the ground for the next year. But, the birds can take shelter in its shade and what is not mentioned to us is that the mustard plant is also valued by humans. In addition to being used as a spice, there are many health benefits associated with mustard – it is used to treat snake and scorpion bites, toothache, indigestion, asthma, epilepsy, constipation, dropsy, lethargy, tetanus, leprosy sores, and other illnesses...all of this according to the first century writings of Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder (160, 162 in *Short Stories By Jesus*, Amy-Jill Levine).

From the first part of our story today, we learn that there is a person who sows the seeds then does nothing to help the seeds grow. This isn't at all what a farmer would actually do and so we know a point is being made. We can plant but God is in charge of all the rest. God takes care of the nurturing and growth of the seeds we plant. We notice that there is plan to the process and it is orderly..."first the stalk, then the head, and then the full grain in the head." When the grain is ripe, we are again called into action to harvest it...or are we? There is an unknown person who grabs a sickle to cut the wheat and gather it into his barn – "he" could be us – the sowers – or "he" could be God, who is still in charge after all. Perhaps it is left as an unknown so that we can know that it is both us and God involved in the harvest of the seeds that were sown.

Now for God's kingdom. God reigns over all things. We are told this over and over again. That would make everything – all things visible and invisible – a part of God's kingdom. But where is the perfection of God's kingdom that we're waiting for? Clearly, we are not – and the world is not – anywhere near perfect. But, God made flesh – Jesus the Christ – came to dwell among us on earth. Jesus not only proclaimed the kingdom of God, he embodied the kingdom of God in its perfection. Jesus brought with him all of the things that were expected to occur when the Day of the Lord arrived and God's kingdom was complete on earth...He brought the forgiveness of sins, freedom to the captives, good news to the

oppressed, sight to the blind, healing to the sick...He proclaimed to his hometown crowd in Nazareth that he brought the fulfillment of these things and they angrily ran him out of town.

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, whom I've quoted before, shares with us the amazing reality, the crucial truth that we – as disciples of Jesus Christ and as his body on earth, the Church – we continue the presence of God's kingdom that Jesus bore in his perfection. We are sent, not only to proclaim the kingdom, but to bear the presence of the kingdom in our lives. We are sent to bear this gift to the world.

Of course, this doesn't mean that our brokenness, our sinfulness has somehow disappeared. We are a community of sinners and so sometimes we go about things in a way contrary to life in God's kingdom and we run into problems. One of these problems we run into happens when we focus on the small to great idea in the parable in terms of the world's idea of greatness. Small to great in worldly terms usually means you've "made it big." It's a move from poverty to riches, from barren to lavish, from bread and water to a three course meal, from being a 'nobody' to being a 'somebody.' These things reflect the world's idea of greatness, that is, of power – position, property, and pocketbook. Think about when the church was considered great. The church was considered great when it had power – the world's idea of power, that is...when the church had a huge influence on the politics going on around it, it had a voice that was listened to, and, in fact, had a whole lot of worldly politics going on within it as well. The church was considered great when it had money overflowing its coffers...huge, lavish buildings were built for worship with expensive commissioned paintings and stained-glass windows, the church was rich – rich in money, rich in possessions, rich in property, people filled the pews...That was when the church was considered great. We know that acquiring greatness in position, property, and pocketbook is simply not the way of God's kingdom yet we continue to apply those worldly standards to the Church. It's not that there is anything inherently wrong about having money and material things and status. The problem is the constant desire to have more and the imbalance created – the wealth imbalance, the power imbalance, the status imbalance that excludes and discriminates. In God's kingdom, all people will have enough, all people will be seen as equals,

every person and all things will be respected and valued. The word “greatness” will no longer have meaning because all of creation will have been brought to the perfection that awaits.

So, if you think the church was once great and is now struggling or weak – the church is now “not great,” in other words – then this is where the message of this story clicks into place for us and brings us fresh insight and hope. Here is where we put together what we’ve learned...

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. Jesus brought the perfect presence of God’s kingdom into this world in his body and we, the body of Christ, together bear the presence of God’s kingdom to the world. It is a fast-growing kingdom, spreading easily, springing to life with very little human care. In fact, Jesus reminds us, God is in charge, God has a plan, and sometimes we must not meddle – trying to do things our own way – we sow seeds and let God’s plan unfold. The kingdom will grow. The kingdom will spread.

And, as bearers of the kingdom, we must repeatedly die to be born anew. We die individually to the ways of the world and together, as the church, we must die to the ways of the world. This is what we did in our baptism – dying with Christ and being raised to new life, turning away from the broken ways of the world and embracing the life-giving ways of God’s kingdom. This means letting go of habits and even customs and traditions that, as comfortable as they may be in their familiarity, do not bring the life of the kingdom. This means letting go of the world’s idea of a “great” church, of a successful church – with riches, property, and popularity – and embrace the church that bears God’s kingdom, the church that forgives, that embraces the outcast, that loves the unlovely, that provides for the needs of the world, following the lead of God the Holy Spirit, ready to harvest what we have sown.

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. Let us be the greatest of shrubs.