

MARVEL AT GOD'S GREEN THUMB

Mark 4:26-34 | Fourth Sunday after Pentecost | June 14/17, 2018

[Jesus] said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it?"³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth.

Jesus

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

When we say that someone has a "green thumb" we mean that they are good at growing things: beautiful flowers, healthy vegetables, lush lawns – whatever.

Do you know the origin of that term *green thumb*? According to James Underwood Crockett, host of PBS's *Victory Garden* for many years and writer of many gardening books, it comes from the fact that algae growing on the outside of earthenware pots will stain a person thumb (and fingers) if he or she handles enough pots. Hence, a person who is always working with flower pots has a green thumb. From there it wasn't a big step to get to its current meaning: someone who is good at making things grow.

Our God has the greenest thumb of all. I'm not talking about his great power and wisdom that created and preserves this lush world. I'm talking about his power to grow a kingdom – not a visible kingdom of palatial palaces and powerful armies, but an invisible kingdom that exists in human hearts, the kingdom of faith in his Son, Jesus Christ. Today we MARVEL AT GOD'S GREEN THUMB. He starts with the poorest soil. He uses the most powerful seed. He grows plants filled with life.

I. He Starts with the Poorest Soil

My dad grew up in Haleyville, Alabama. In 1953 he moved to Flint, Michigan and became an auto worker. Sometime in the late 50s or early 60s my grandpa came to Michigan for a visit. He traveled by bus. When he arrived all he could talk about was the dark, black soil of Ohio and Michigan seen from his bus window. That soil is such a contrast to the red clay that stained his boots. My dad said that whenever they drove by a farm grandpa would just stare at the dirt. We have been blessed with beautiful soil here in the Midwest. It is dark and rich, perfect for growing crops.

How different is the soil of the human heart! The prophet Jeremiah wrote: **The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?** (17:9) By nature our hearts are not just sort of bad. They are totally depraved, filled with evil. Jesus once described what the soil of the human heart naturally produces: **"For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly** (Mark 7:21-22). That's an ugly list, and sadly one to which we can all relate. Every one of those horrible weeds has

grown in the soil of my sinful heart. And yours too. By nature our hearts produce nothing but the thorns and thistles of sin and unbelief.

But God has a green thumb. He takes this pathetic soil and turns it into the good soil that Jesus described in the Parable of the Sower, soil that produces **“a crop a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown”** (Matthew 13:8). Like a farmer plowing his field to prepare for planting, God breaks up our stony hearts with the spade of his law. That law convicts us of our sin and condemns us to eternal death. That law forces us to cry out, **“God, have mercy on me, a sinner”** (Luke 18:13). It is then, with our hearts prepared and ready, that the Great Gardener plants the most powerful seed of all, the seed of his gospel.

II. He Uses the Most Powerful Seed

Listen again to the Teacher’s words: **“This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹ As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”**

There is mystery here. A farmer does not understand how a seed grows. Even a botanist who studies the working of seeds on the molecular or atomic level will have to admit that there is a mysterious power in the seed. Paul calls the gospel **“the**

power of God that brings salvation” (Romans 1:16). That’s what our God wants. He **“wants all people to be saved”** (1 Timothy 2:4). He wants to rescue every soul from the well-earned wages of sin.

When the gospel seed is sown in hearts prepared by the law, something miraculous happens. It sprouts. It takes root. It grows. It matures. It produces fruit. And finally it is harvested. How this happens is a mystery. God has not revealed to us the details of how this all works. He just tells us that, **No one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit** (1 Corinthians 12:3). He just tells us that **faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the Word of Christ** (Romans 10:17). The good news of Jesus works powerfully and yet invisibly and mysteriously in human hearts. Through that gospel God grows his kingdom.

The evidence of the power of that gospel seed is sitting here in front of me. I look out at you and I see the evidence of God’s green thumb. Think about it. You are not here because your pastor has such a dynamic personality and winning smile. You are not here because this church is so beautiful (though it is). You are not here because your family has always attended this church. You are here because God’s powerful gospel seed has taken root in your hearts.

For most of you that seed was first planted at the font. When the pastor poured water on your head in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the

gospel seed was sown in your heart, and a tiny sprout of faith began to grow there. Since then our green-thumbed God has nurtured that little plant of faith with the gospel in Word and Supper.

That gospel has worked a miracle in your hearts, the miracle of faith in Jesus. What wonderful things you believe! God demands that you live a sinless life. By faith you trust that God considers you as one who has lived just such a life, because Jesus' perfect life counts for you. God demands that you be punished for your sins. By faith you trust that God has already punished you for your sins. He did that 2,000 years ago when he punished Jesus on the cross in your place. His precious blood, the perfect payment, counts for you. All of your sins are forgiven. You were born into this world doomed to eternal death. But by faith you trust that Jesus rose, conquered death and opened the gates to eternal life. By faith you believe what God tells you in his Word: that you are his own, dear child, that all your sins are washed away in Jesus' blood and that you will live forever in a perfect paradise. How did that happen? The Gardner sowed his seed. The gospel did it's miraculous and mysterious work.

III. He Grows Plants Filled with Life

Jesus has another insight to share with us about God's kingdom: **"What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. ³² Yet when planted,**

it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade."

Look at the gospel seed. It seems so tiny, so insignificant. Very old words printed on the pages of a book. A little water splashed on a baby's head. A bite of bread and a sip of wine. Small. Weak. Insignificant. Or so it seems at first glance. But like that tiny mustard seed that grows into a giant plant, the gospel accomplishes big things. It changes hearts. It changes lives. It changes the world.

Some may think our little congregation doesn't have much to offer to our community much less the world. We don't operate a homeless shelter or a soup kitchen. We don't have a huge youth program with dozens of paid counselors. We don't have the staff to offer support groups for every problem or classes on every conceivable topic. We are a small group of believers gathered around the Word and sacraments, humble sinners seeking solace and salvation in the gospel of Jesus.

But remember: that seemingly insignificant gospel is anything but. It is powerful. Think of how it has changed your life. Think of the comfort that it has brought you during a time of crisis. Think of the peace that it has brought you at a time of loss. Think of the power that it has given you to do amazing things: to volunteer your time, to give generously, to forgive graciously, to grow, to reach out, to love, to serve.

Think of what this means for our mission.

Our only job is to scatter the powerful seed of the gospel. And then we just sit back and watch as God builds his Church, as the Great Gardener grows that plant, a plant so big and beautiful that even the birds come and **“perch in its shade.”**

People all over the world benefit from God’s Kingdom, even those who aren’t part of it. They benefit from the kindness and generosity, the service and zeal and witness of everyday Christians like you and me.

Our insignificant, hardly-heard-of congregation here on the lakeshore is armed with the powerful gospel of Jesus Christ. Filled with life through that gospel, we can do amazing things. We can gather around that Word and rejoice in the great things God has done as we offer him our very best worship. We can study that gospel in homes and classrooms letting the Word of Christ dwell in us richly (Colossians 3:16). We can use our time and our talents to serve one another in love. We can offer our dollars for gospel outreach and use our own voices to tell others about Jesus. We can do it all in joyful thanks to the one who made us citizens of his kingdom, who called us out of the darkness of unbelief into the light of faith, the Great Gardner who grows the Church of which we are privileged to call ourselves members.

I don’t have a green thumb. Thankfully our God does. Because of his grace we are part of his garden, plants sprouted and growing to his glory. And one day Jesus will come again to bring in the harvest. May God hasten that day for his glory and

our salvation! Amen.

S.D.G.