

The Gospel passage this morning contains two of the parables of grace found in the Gospel of Mark chapter 4. Set in context chapter 4 has Jesus teaching the crowds that have gathered on the shore of Galilee to hear him. The two parables we just heard are the final two stories that he tells the crowd that day. Jesus is attempting to describe what the kingdom of God is and how it is present in the world, if the people have eyes to see it and ears to hear it! God's grace is working unseen in the world, in the soil of everyday life. Jesus uses the image of a seed sown upon the ground. It is literally scattered on the ground, not in any orderly fashion. Then while the sower goes about his daily activities the seed sprouts and grows, he does not know how it happens, it just does. God's kingdom where people are loved and respected for who they are grows in the midst of our daily lives. In the little acts of kindness and compassion those followers of Jesus offer to the world each day. Calling a friend during the pandemic, offering a kind word to someone we encounter, making a meal for the family, listening to a friend or running an errand for someone. These are all small manifestations of God's kingdom growing in our world.

Jesus' parable about the mustard seed was a shock to those who first heard it. We have heard it so often that it has lost its impact for us to be truly moved by it as an example of God's grace working in our world. The mustard seed that Jesus is referring to is a type of black mustard that grows along the banks of the Jordan River. It can grow up to 8 feet in height, but it is a weed! Those listening to Jesus on the shore of Galilee knew it as a plant that needed to be eradicated in order to grow anything useful. It would have been like Jesus saying that the Kingdom of God is like kudzu in the south United States. It covers everything and grows very fast. It was the last thing they would have planted! In fact it was something that they would be actively trying to get rid of in their fields. They knew from experience that the mustard plant was hard to control and resistant to being uprooted. It spread quickly even if burned would sprout up elsewhere. It was not the greatest of all shrubs, it was a weed!! Yes, the birds could find shelter in its shade, but it is hardly the image of grandeur that one would expect of a great kingdom. The cedars of Lebanon were the image of a great kingdom! The mighty cedars were the symbol of Assyria and Judah. God's kingdom is a shrub!? What kind of symbol is that! Once again Jesus is saying that God's reality, God's kingdom does not resemble the ways of the world or the ways of nations. It is not what people expect greatness to look like. In Jesus' life and ministry God's grace was present in the world. Jesus kept upsetting the religious and secular authorities. Using a mustard seed as an image for God's kingdom showed how God's desire for creation would eventually cover everything. It will continue to thrive regardless of the obstacles or resistance that people have to it. God's ways of being in the world will upset society's ways of perceiving things, it will break down human created boundaries and divisions as it spreads over humanities' prejudices and societies' values. It will resist human efforts to eradicate it and change the landscape. Even when people attempt to burn it and bring back their old fields, their old ways of doing things God's kingdom like the mustard plant will continue to sprout and disrupt the old order.

God's kingdom, following the way of Jesus, claims all aspects of our lives as a mustard plant spread over the ground of Jordan. We may not perceive God's grace working within us, but it is there through our relationship with Jesus Christ urging us to resist all

powers that seek to destroy the dignity of any person. In our relationship with Christ the seed of God's grace within us is moving our hearts and actions to bring down the barriers, which divide us, to overcome distrust of those different from ourselves and to work against hatred and greed in this country. So that our divisions being healed we may all live in justice and peace. That is the society that Christ is calling us to build, the fruit of the seed buried within us by Christ's Spirit. A nation where all are treated with respect where all share in the blessings of their labor. A nation where people have access to healthcare, food and shelter. A nation where the stranger is welcomed not with fear but with support, as Jesus was welcomed as a stranger into people's homes.

The early church communities that met in homes, those started by Paul and led mostly by women, cared for each other. They attracted attention because they were so different from other religions and the way that society viewed people. The early Christian communities were made up of people from various levels of society, slaves, merchants, women and men, those who normally would not mingle with each other. The growth of those early churches was dependent on God working through them. As Paul said, he planted another watered and God gave the growth. The followers of Jesus trusted that God would provide for them as they cared for each other and lived the teachings of Jesus in their daily lives. We are to do the same in our own time. Pastor Steve Garnaas-Holmes wrote in his weekly blog, *Unfolding Light*:

You are the seed to be scattered, dead and buried,
and raised, transformed, and given over.
Your life is the seed, you let go of it,
and after much dying and rising
it produces, you know not how.
We are the seed, God's people,
and only after much death and resurrection
do we become life-giving bread.
God is the seed, growing secretly in you,
bearing fruit abundantly.
God's promise is the seed in this world,
God's grace, silently flourishing beneath our feet.
ripening, ripening.

God chooses what is foolish by the world's standards to bring forth new life. He choose David, the shepherd, the least of his family to be the greatest leader of Israel. Jesus from the backwater area of Galilee brought God's love incarnated into our world. Christ the King in our diversity has the potential to show our neighbors how to work together as one Body in Christ. We are the seed that God has planted in this place, the seed of God's grace working secretly within us as we experienced a fallow time during this past year. God's grace growing within us as a church so that we will bear fruit abundantly spreading God's desire for all of God's people in this community. May we, like the mustard seed, be resilient and grow covering this community with God's grace through God's Spirit sprouting in our midst.