

The Third Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, Proper 6
The Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
June 13, 2021
Ezekiel 17:22-24
Psalm 20
2 Corinthians 5:6-10(11-13)14-17
Mark 4:26-34

What Is Our Part?

If you didn't know otherwise, you might think that today is Arbor Day or Agricultural Heritage Day or even Avian Appreciation Day. All this talk of seeds and planting and trees and birds in the reading from Ezekiel and the gospel from Mark.

And in our gospel today we have two parables about planting. Jesus tells first a parable about how seeds grow on their own after being sown in the ground and then the parable of the mustard seed.

The mustard seed is found in Matthew and Luke as well as Mark. It seems pretty straightforward, doesn't it? The mustard seed is the tiniest of seeds and yet it grows into a bush so huge that it's like a tree. Except, it doesn't, actually. And the mustard seed isn't the tiniest of all seeds; both orchid and cypress seeds are smaller.

There are not tree-sized mustard bushes. They don't grow that big. Black mustard, for example, if cultivated in perfect conditions tops out at eight to ten feet. And some varieties don't grow very big at all. The mustard that grows in the Galilee region produces a bush no more than a foot tall.

So, what's going on? Is Jesus just making stuff up? Or is there something different happening here besides allusions to agrarian realities?

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The nature of parables is that they are not allegories. Every element in a parable is not a stand-in for something else. Parables are means of comparison. They are open-ended. They have many possible interpretations. What we hear, what meaning we make of it, how we understand that meaning, and how we apply that meaning, or not, are all dependent on us.

In every one of Jesus' parables, even the ones that are only one sentence long, there is something surprising. Sometimes surprisingly shocking. Sometimes surprisingly funny.

Well, I should say, for the original hearers of Jesus' parables there was something surprising in every one of them.

Twenty centuries down the road, most of us have probably heard all Jesus' parables, and especially ones like "the mustard seed," so often that they really don't shock us or jolt us into some new understanding about God, the world, or ourselves.

But in the first century they packed a powerful punch. And they were a very familiar teaching tool in the Jewish traditions of which Jesus was a part.

For first-century hearers of Jesus' parables they would have been like big, jagged rocks too sharp to hang onto. For most of us, they are worn smooth like pebbles, so familiar. And whether they challenge us or comfort us—and they may do both at different times in our lives—we have heard them before and we can often manage to avoid really listening to them.

So, what is surprising for us today about a small seed growing into a useful plant in which the birds of the air can find rest?

I think the answer may be in the implied role of humans in the mustard seed parable. *With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?* ³¹*It is like a mustard seed, which, **when sown upon the ground**, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth;*

when sown upon the ground

Somehow the tiniest of seeds must be placed in the earth. Someone has to sow the seed. Once we figure that out or remember it, it is pretty straightforward.

And today's gospel gives us at least two opportunities to grasp it. For we have not only the parable of the mustard seed but also the less famous parable of the growing seed at the beginning of the passage.

The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.

Perhaps the surprising thing for us is that we don't have to do everything. But we do have to do our part.

And what is that?

In the two parables we have today, the part of humans is planting the seed and then getting out of the way. God has created a world in which seeds will quietly, secretly, almost imperceptibly germinate and grow in the dark of the good earth. In due course, in the right conditions, seeds will become full-grown plants.

In the case of mustard seed, a tiny seed that we might not even see unless we are looking produces a plant that brings us something tasty to eat, has medicinal properties, and also benefits other species besides us.

We don't have to do everything. But we have to do, we need to do, we are invited to do our part. Not our part and everyone else's part. Not our part and God's part, as if we could.

It puts me in the mind of a phrase from the first letter to the Corinthians (3:9), "we are laborers together with God." *Cum deo laboramus*. We work with God. And God works with us and with the rest of the creation God has made.

What is my part? What is your part? What is our part? In this ministry context at this time, what is God inviting us to do together with God and each other and the wider community?

This is what we are discerning. And, according to the letter of agreement between me as the rector and the vestry of St Paul's, within my first sixty days as rector I will prepare and present to the vestry a personal ministry plan for my work here. And the vestry and I together in the first one hundred and twenty days will co-create a parish ministry plan for our work as a congregation.

The letter of agreement also says, "Both plans may be revised and amended according to need and circumstance as time goes on."

So, in community with each other and in conversation with the wider community in which we are embedded we will together discern what our work is. And, with God as our companion and co-laborer we will be about it.

It is impossible to do everything. And this is good news not bad news. For we are not called as individuals or as a congregation to do everything. We are called to do our part. And we begin by honestly and prayerfully discerning what our part is.

Thus, we can affirm the confident testimony of the second reading today from the second letter to the Corinthians: *we make it our aim to please God*. And we find *the love of Christ urges us on*.

With all this in mind, the collect of the day is worth praying again,

Keep, O Lord, your household the Church in your steadfast faith and love, that through your grace we may proclaim your truth with boldness, and minister your justice with compassion; for the sake of our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. AMEN.