

Gospel Reading Mark 4:26-34

The gospel is announced:

A: The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark the 4th chapter.

C: Glory to you O Lord.

²⁶He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

³⁰He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³²yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

³³With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

After the reading:

A: The gospel of the Lord

C: Praise to you O Christ.

What is a kingdom? Our first inclination may be to think of the earthly realm where a country has a king or queen sits atop a throne, ruling over his or her lowly subjects. Perhaps Great Britain or Saudi Arabia comes to mind. The ruler that we envision may not actually have any true power...acting as nothing more than a figurehead. I assure you that the gospel reading has something very different in mind for our vision of the kingdom of God.

I was impressed and admittedly a bit surprised when consulting a dictionary that two of the six definitions of the word "kingdom" actually contain a Christian context. These entries mention the spiritual sovereignty of God or Christ and the domain of that sovereign area.

The Kingdom of God has significance to us...or at least it should...because it is mentioned over 100 times throughout the New Testament. It isn't mentioned with quite the same frequency that the word love appeared in our lessons a few weeks back from 1 John 4 (28 times in less than one chapter), but you get the idea. The writers of the New Testament are trying to convey its importance, so we need to understand what it means to provide a deeper purpose for us.

As is often the case, gospel readings show Jesus using parables to teach his disciples, and us. Parables typically offer an example that we can interpret to apply for use in our daily life, as well as a more weighty insight into Christian beliefs. The source of today's gospel reading (Mark 4) is yet another series of parables, including the Parable of the Growing Seed and the Parable of the Mustard Seed.

In verse 26, Jesus states - 'This is what the kingdom of God is like.' He follows up with the imagery of a seed that grows. The Parable of the Growing Seed helps us to comprehend how God aids in our spiritual growth as Christians. This story focuses on the vitality that is contained within the simplest, smallest seed.

A seed is full of life. But, how does that seed grow to yield life? I'm sure just about all of you can answer that question about a seed's needs for development – sunlight, water, and soil are the basics. For those of you approaching middle school age or beyond, maybe the word photosynthesis came to mind.

In the 1st Century A.D. of the Middle East, a mustard seed was the tiniest seed that people planted. If you had the proverbial green thumb, you could see your mustard plant grow to the size of a small tree.

In this parable, who is doing the sowing? The answer is Mr. Green Thumb himself, or more clearly stated, mankind. In looking at the verse, we are responsible for the scattering of the seed. We are sowing the seeds of the word of God.

How can we do that here on earth? There are innumerable ways. We can share a gospel reading with someone. We can participate in a wonderfully fulfilling Maggie's Kids camp (third week of July, see Bettina Kalish for more details). We can even mow the lawn here at church to keep our property looking wonderful to show that we are proud of our congregation and want it to look inviting to others (the mowing sign-up sheet is in the gathering area. As Dave Bullwinkle would say, spots are going fast!). No one is exempt from sowing the seeds – children can invite friends to participate in Sunday School when it resumes in September.

These are all wonderful endeavors that help us to sow the seeds. Hopefully you feel better about yourself for doing one of these good deeds. It should offer a sense of fulfillment, pride, and satisfaction when you see the results of planting a seed here and a seed there.

However, the gospel lesson talks about scattering the seed...not planting. When I try to plant anything (which mercifully is rare), I find a very specific plot of soil that looks appropriate. I bury the seed at an appropriate depth. I make sure that the seed gets the prescribed amount of water and sunlight. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't, but that's almost assuredly a product of my ineptitude at gardening. I don't merely throw handfuls of seeds into the air, hoping for the best. That would yield even less of a return and I might see a sunflower growing in the middle of the yard or a tomato plant that found a crack in the driveway to survive.

When a person scatters his seed, he doesn't see where each seed falls unless he's Rain Man. If the seeds land on suitable ground, it can certainly grow. But how? Because the seed is alive. Think of the seed and remember it has vitality. The seed can be thought of as...the Word of God. If we are eager and willing to provide fertile soil by opening our heart and mind, the seed of the kingdom of God will begin to grow within us.

In the gospel of John, Jesus has said that his kingdom is not of this world. The kingdom of God is nothing that we can see with our eyes here on earth. Sure, we can experience things here that warm our hearts (like holding your child for the first time, seeing your girlfriend's reaction to a wedding proposal – she did say yes, watching a sunset over a lake that reflects the colorful sky right at your feet, or even something as trivial as a Steelers Super Bowl championship). In these instances, we recognize beautiful things that happen here on earth. But, seeing these things do not show us God's kingdom. Rather, the kingdom of God is within us. We cannot see this kingdom until we are born again...when we are raised again to new life.

Although we cannot see Jesus' kingdom here, we can feel it because He reigns in the hearts and minds of us as his followers. His kingdom includes those who have given themselves to him and made him King of their lives. (pause)

The parable of the mustard seed speaks to the magnitude that the kingdom of God can grow. The kingdom of God may swell inside you because the word of God is alive; it is active and is capable of growing. It is the living word of a living God. The Bible is a living, breathing document that can be life-altering. Although God's word can change life all on its own, as mankind, we can be disciples to help spread the seed, to spread the kingdom of God.

But how? We allow spiritual growth to occur within each one of us and spread. Many of life's most profound truths are its simplest. How we spread God's message can begin with very simple steps. The song, "They will know we are Christians by our love" comes to mind for me. It's a song we hear from time to time, usually from Sunday School aged children. Its message is simple - show love and compassion for other human beings. Exhibit common courtesy. Open doors for a complete stranger. Offer help to a person who is in distress. If you're out on the roads, show some self-control and avoid road rage (I need to take this advice). Volunteer at the food cupboard. Serve at a soup kitchen. Initiate a conversation with someone about how you've been saved by God's love. When you take a small step in the right direction, it makes taking a bigger step in that positive direction easier.

I'm also reminded of the movie, "Pay It Forward." If you've seen it or read the novel, perhaps you recall the premise. A young boy has a class assignment where he is to come up with a "big idea" to make the world a better place. So...he identifies three people who he can help with no expectation or desire for something in return, but rather, to ask them to find three others to help in a similar fashion. And allow this to perpetuate. Hint, hint – Our Pay it Forward capital campaign is still underway. If you initiate small steps toward sharing and cultivating God's love, it can take off much like a Youtube video about cute puppies going viral. Wouldn't the world be a better place if we spread the seed, if we spread the kingdom of God to touch others?

Two millennia ago, Jesus continued the ministry of the prophets that came before him in sowing the good news of the kingdom of God. At that time, Jesus showed God's followers that there was a tangible, real being who personified living out the word of God. He was one man preaching the good news, the word of God...touching far more than three people at a time.

The kingdom of God is something we should all hope to share. It is one of the greatest gifts of being a Christian – to be able to spread the kingdom of God to others. We are blessed to be given this opportunity. Go out into the world and let others know that the kingdom of God is alive and thriving within you. Amen.