

A father tells of taking his four-year-old son, Josh, out to McDonald's for dinner one evening for a "guys' night out." As they were eating their hamburgers, Josh asked, "*Daddy, what are these little things on the hamburger buns?*" Dad explained that they were tiny seeds and that they were OK to eat. Josh was quiet for a couple of minutes and his Dad could tell Josh was in deep thought. Finally, Josh looked up and said, "*Dad, if we go home and plant these seeds in our backyard, will WE have enough hamburgers to last forever.*"

Not a bad guess from a four-year-old. However, we know that hamburgers don't come from sesame seeds. **But Josh was sure right about one thing—TINY SEEDS CAN PRODUCE A BOUNTIFUL HARVEST.**

Jesus often compared the Kingdom of God to seeds sown in the ground.

In today's lesson from Mark's Gospel we discover two such parables of the Kingdom. The first reads like this: "*This is what the Kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain--first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.*"

Now, remember this is a parable about the Kingdom of God. What is the Kingdom of God? It is God's reign in human life. Jesus taught us to pray, "*Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.*" In other words, the day is coming when, on this earth, God's love will reign in every heart. At that point, the world will live in peace. **There will be no more pain, no more hunger, no more war. The Kingdom came into the world with Jesus and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, it has been growing ever since.**

Notice in this parable that the farmer doesn't plow the seed under nor does he irrigate it. He simply scatters the seed on the ground. Then says Jesus, "*Night and day, whether [the farmer] sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain--first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head.*" All by itself, the earth produces grain and the grain matures in successive stages. **The soil does this automatically.**

In the Greek translation, scholars tell us, a better rendering would be that the seed does this **"without visible cause"** or **"without human agency."** **This is to say that the Kingdom is God's work.** God is responsible for the outcome. This is the amazing thing about seed. It will often grow with or without our help. **Not only that, it will often grow with great abundance.**

A certain gardener decided to count the seed pods on a medium-sized mustard plant. There were 85. The average number of seeds in each pod was eight. Since two crops in a given year could be matured, this gardener figured that it was possible in the interim **between February and mid-October to produce a yield of 462,000 seeds, all from one original plant.** Here's what's amazing. Many other species of plants far exceed that increase. **Nature is bountiful beyond all imagining.**

The Kingdom of God is like that. We may not see it. It may be hidden by the maddening follies of humanity. That doesn't mean it is not at work.

I like John Beukema's analogy of the CENTURY PLANT. The century plant is found in the desert. It is so named because it is a slow grower. For decades, the century plant will show no signs of growth. It will just look like a scrubby, ugly little bush. Then one day, it will suddenly start growing. It may grow half a foot per day and reach up to forty feet. And after it has reached its full growth, the century plant suddenly produces flowers. Its bright yellow blossoms last for weeks at a time. It is a spectacular sight for anyone who has the patience to watch for it.

The Kingdom of God is like that. We may not see any signs of it at work, but suddenly without warning God does a wondrous new work and we look with delight at what God has done.

Jesus, of course, uses the analogy of the mustard seed in our second parable:

“What shall we say the Kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. 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.”

The common black mustard seed was the smallest of all the seeds sown in the fields of Palestine. It took about 760 mustard seeds to weigh ONE gram. How small is one gram? Well, it takes 28 grams to equal one ounce. That’s how small mustard seeds are. But growing from such a small seed the mustard shrub becomes the largest of all garden plants. It reaches heights of 12-15 feet in a few weeks.

This parable highlights the insignificant beginning of God’s Kingdom, embodied in Jesus. Born in an obscure village of peasant parents, working until he was thirty in a carpenter’s shop. Gathering around him a motley group of men and women, most of whom were drawn from the lower tiers of society in wealth and prestige. And yet, like that insignificant little seed quickly outgrows all the other plants in the garden, so too will the Kingdom of God surpass all the earth’s kingdoms in power and glory.

SO WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THESE 2 PARABLES? First of all, we learn that God USES SMALL INSIGNIFICANT ACTS OF KINDNESS to build His Kingdom. That is because one small act often leads to another, and then another, and so on. Let me give you an example of that.

Do you know the name Rick Ruzzamenti? I didn’t think so. Not too long ago, Rick Ruzzamenti, a native of Riverside, California made the news with a radical act of kindness for a stranger. **Rick gave one of his kidneys to someone he didn’t even know.** Now you and I might donate a kidney for a family member. Maybe even for a good friend. But a complete stranger? Rick was inspired by a friend who had donated a kidney to help someone. Rick’s kidney ended up in a man in **Livingston, New Jersey.**

What makes this story more wonderful is that Rick’s act started a chain of donations. The niece of the man who received Rick’s kidney made a donation, giving one of her kidneys to a stranger, and so on. Within a relatively short time, 30 people have received kidneys as the result of the chain of giving set off by Rick’s act. Donald Terry, a man in Joliet, Illinois, was the most recent recipient. He was expecting to have to wait five years or more for a transplant.

With some 67,000 people dying every year from kidney failure in the United States, the need for transplant donors is great. Rick Ruzzamenti is matter-of-fact about his gift. According to the website which reported his story, he said, “People think it’s so odd that I’m donating a kidney . . . I think it’s so odd that they think it’s so odd.”

Whether he knows it or not, Rick Ruzzamenti planted a seed for the Kingdom of God when he donated a kidney to a stranger. *Anytime one human being does a loving act for another human being, the Kingdom comes closer. It is even more obvious when a follower of Christ performs such an act in his name. What a witness that is!*

Those were signs of the Kingdom. Every act of kindness to a neighbor or a stranger, every effort no matter how small to improve our world, **every act of witness to the presence of God in our world is used by God as a building block for God’s Kingdom.** **There are (3) simple truths we need to take away when we leave worship today from these two parables of Jesus.**

The first is that God is at work in our world. I like the way Meghan Feldmeyer put it in an address in the Duke University Chapel sometime back. Feldmeyer reminded her audience of the Bette Midler song, “From a Distance” which she recorded in the early 1990s. It won a Grammy. The song talks about how “from a distance, the world looks blue and green, and snow-capped mountains white . . . and from a distance there is harmony, and no guns or bombs or disease . . . and God is watching us from a distance.” Remember that song?

Feldmeyer notes that the song is so lovely with its images of peace and harmony that you almost find yourself believing it . . . that is until you realize it is totally FALSE. Heresy! Theological [rubbish]. The parable of the mustard seed tells us that. “God is not watching us from a distance . . . God is not some pie in the sky God [who] looks down

and glosses over suffering, and who doesn't deal in the reality of our lives. [The God of the mustard seed is a] God who comes to earth to be among us . . . who reduces Himself to the scant, insignificant life of a poor carpenter . . . who enters into the dirt and mud, pain and suffering . . . and who gently but persistently cracks open new life.

“If you were to pick up a handful of dirt and soil, the mustard seed is so small, you probably can't even distinguish it. It's hidden, out of sight, and hard to find even if you are looking. But it doesn't mean it isn't there . . . the mustard seed awaits, concealed and invisible, until the time is ripe to unleash its mighty re-birth. Just because we can't see the mustard seed doesn't mean the mustard seed isn't there. In the same way, our inability to see doesn't affect God's ability to be. And God is always for us.”

I like that. “Our inability to see doesn't affect God's ability to be.”

The second TRUTH IS...the attitude of the believer should always be one of HOPEFULNESS. So many people are being stirred to despair today by the constant barrage of bad news carried primarily by cable news networks. Just remember, these networks have a tremendous amount of time to fill. Bad news always sells, and since, in any portion of the world you can find something disturbing going on, it may seem to the undiscerning viewer that the whole world is coming apart. It is not. The truth is that there is less bad news in the world than ever before. People are living longer, less people are living in poverty, on the whole the world is more peaceful than it has ever been.

Even in most large cities of the U. S. the streets are, by and large, safer to walk than they were a few decades ago. That doesn't mean that there won't be genuine crises from time to time. But the truest words of any song ever written are these, “This is my Father's world, O let me ne'er forget that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.”

God is at work in the world. The attitude of the believer should always be hopefulness--not because of what human beings may do, but because of God's plan for the world. The Kingdom of God is coming. God will prevail.

This brings us to the final TRUTH...Let's make certain we are on the winning side. We certainly don't want to be standing in God's way when His Kingdom comes. We want to be on the side of hope, peace, love, healing and faith.

Some of you will remember when the NFL's Seattle Seahawks played their games in a domed stadium known as the Kingdome. A noted Washington state pastor of that era, Dr. Joe A. Harding, shared a conversation he once heard on a radio station that was describing the play-by-play action of a game being played in the Kingdome.

The battle was between the Seattle Seahawks and the New Orleans Saints. It was late in the fourth quarter. It looked like the Seahawks were going to win. However, the Saints got one more chance. A few plays were successful. Anticipation was growing. The announcer said, “The Saints are marching down the field. The Saints are playing together. It now looks like the Saints are going to win in the Kingdome.”

And that is one of the few things you can count on in this turbulent world. GOD IS WINNING. The saints of God are winning. The only way you can be certain you are on the winning side is to be faithful in serving God and in serving THOSE AROUND YOU. Like seed planted in the ground, even if it is as tiny as a mustard seed, the Kingdom will spring forth eventually as a blessing to all—AND YOU AND THOSE AROUND YOU WILL BE WINNERS.

SO, PLANT WHATEVER SEEDS YOU CAN, AND WAIT FOR THE RESULTS, KNOWING THAT LIKE JOSH LEARNED--THAT WITH GOD NEAR BY YOUR HARVEST OF THE TINIEST SEEDS THAT YOU PLANT CAN PRODUCE THE MOST BOUNTIFUL HARVEST.

However, it probably won't be Hamburgers. Amen.