

Sermon Proper 6 B

Let me start off by saying that the images in today's gospel would have made more sense to an agricultural people than they do to most of us who live in a major metropolitan area. Those of you who are gardeners may "get" some of these images. But, the farmers who heard Jesus **really** understood what he was saying. And they were both comforted and challenged by what he said.

The stories of Jesus that Mark relates are meant for people in personal peril, discouraged, frightened, at fear for their very lives. Those who listened to Mark were being persecuted for their beliefs by Roman authorities who had made Christianity illegal. So, they were up against a great military power that was out to get them. And in the face of this challenge to their very existence today's scripture delivers a message of hope.

Jesus tells the farmers who gathered around him a story about seed scattered on the ground which sprung up untended. In this parable the farmer goes

out and indiscriminantly throws seeds around and then goes home, puts on his 'jamies and goes to sleep for 8 hours. He gets up, has breakfast, chats with his family and then checks on his seeds, day after day. Eventually they all grow up to be healthy plants.

"Yeah, right!" the farmers would have said to themselves. Clearly, this teacher doesn't farm for a living! Everybody knows you have to work hard to get any decent yield from this rocky soil. You need to turn the earth, fertilize, plant carefully, water, hover over the plants day and night and even then it won't produce much because the earth here doesn't ever produce much.

But here is this rabbi with a message of extravagant hope. Even given your rocky ground, even given your lack of watering, you can just go throw seeds around with reckless abandon and God will create a lavish harvest. All you have to do is something. God can make **anything** out of **something**. Just you wait and see!

And then Jesus tells these farmers a story about the mustard seed. The mustard seed was the smallest of seeds and was actually used as a metaphor for small. Their expression "small as a mustard seed" meant the smallest trace of anything: of blood, of the remnants of the sun at sunset, as small as you could get. That is the image that Jesus uses about the reign of God. You take something incredibly small and with God's power it can grow, quickly, to be the largest of all the shrubs. God can do this even with a frightened, huddled-together group of disciples with far more enemies than friends. I promise you, Jesus tells them. And they believed him and we believe him still.

But we live in a culture that does not value small. We don't go to MacDonal'd's and order a tinsy weensy burger. We order a BIG MAC. As a society we usually measure success by size. But big is not a kingdom value. Often God works best with small and with weak, and with sinful, because as the scriptures remind us: God's power is made perfect

in weakness. So the early Christians were not to be discouraged by their tiny size in the Roman empire. And, indeed, in about 300 years of this gospel Christianity was the official religion of the whole empire.

A message of hope. But it is also, as with all scripture, a challenge as well as a promise. The farmer does need to scatter the seeds. Even not very well, but he **does** need to do **something**. He needs to get out there and roll up his sleeves and do some work. And someone needs to plant the mustard seed, tiny though it is. Someone needs to dig up the earth and place the seed in the soil.

But, this is only part of the challenge to us. We know that we need to work. We understand that. We're good at it. We can schedule it and manage it. That is not the real challenge of this gospel. The real challenge here is that the outcome is out of our hands. God will do whatever God wants with our labor and our time, and we can't control it.

The mustard seed will become the greatest of all the shrubs and then all the birds of the air can make their nest in it.

Mark's audience knew this reference to all the birds gathering and nesting as a metaphor for diversity and inclusion of foreigners, strangers, outcasts, enemies and outsiders. This was not a private shrub for the use of people like us. They knew very well what Jesus meant by all the birds of the air. It meant all the nations of the earth. It meant everybody and anybody can come and will be welcome with us, eating in our shade, living off our branches, finding a home and a nest among us.

These were major issues for the community of Mark, welcoming Gentiles and foreigners. That's what it meant to them to have God control the growth and the harvest. It meant that God would welcome into the community people they might like to exclude.

So the image of the mustard seed as a shrub is a challenge to let go of restriction and boundary and to make the gospel free, God's free grace given

to all who choose to come and nest in the branches of God's mercy. The one who plants the seed cannot control whom God will invite to rest in the tree.

A message of hope to trust God's promises. A challenge to let go of the outcomes. To simply believe, and entrust ourselves, and show up for the work, and rejoice in the outcome whatever it is, because God is far larger than our imaginations, our dreams, our hopes, our consciences, and our loves.

Today we have the privilege of welcoming into our fellowship a child of God. God has sent to us Carter Jackson Mays and in a moment we will bathe him in the saving waters of baptism. And we will recommit ourselves to the Christian life. What we are committing ourselves to and what we are welcoming Carter into is a community grounded in God's promises, reliant on God's grace and grateful for God's power at work among us. What a cause for celebration!

And so to God whose power now at work in us can do infinitely more than we can even ask for or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus now and forever. Amen.