

Simple Shrubs

By

Glenn Brumbaugh

With the warmer, sunnier weather, it's amazing how much greener our little corner of the world has become in the last couple of months. A few weeks ago, I marveled at how beautiful our church building is when everything seems to bloom at once. Now most of the blooming is over, and the plants are growing at full speed. Yesterday, as I hacked and hacked at the wisteria and the many other vines that had taken over the fence along our driveway, I remarked to Bill that despite my impressive hack job, it'll probably be grown over just as bad by next year again. I say "hack job" because if you give me any kind of trimming implement, you need to understand I have no conception of a "light trim." I prune for maximum efficiency. Yet, how those vines grow is indicative of many plants in the world. We plant seeds at some point, water them, maybe fertilize them, and eventually green shoots generally burst forth and get bigger and thicker over time. Some plants, like the vines on our fence, especially ones like morning glories, will go crazy and grow and grow like wildfire. Others may grow much more slowly, taking their time to reach their full potential. Some, like pines and cedars, can grow very tall and thick, creating their own canopy. Others only grow so high and bush out like shrubs and hedges.

It's amazing when you think of all the different plants and growth patterns in the created world around us. While we may plant the initial seed, eventually many of those plants we start then go to flower and spread their own seeds, self-

producing many more. It can be amazing what can come from such a tiny thing as a seed.

In our gospel story today, Jesus tells two parables about seeds and how they grow. In the first he stresses that while we may plant and care for the seed, how that seed grows is really out of our hands. We can do our best to make sure it's planted in the right soil, and it has all the nutrients and conditions it needs to grow, but the rest is up to God.

Some time ago "Reader's Digest" told the story about a company who mailed out some special advertising business post cards with a mustard seed glued to it with the following caption that went something like this: *"If you have faith as small as this mustard seed in our (product), you are guaranteed to get excellent results and be totally satisfied."* -- Signed, The Management. A few months later one recipient of this promotional piece wrote back to the company and said, "You will be very interested to know that I planted the mustard seed you sent on your advertising card and it has grown into a very healthy bush producing wonderful tomatoes!" An amusing example of just how little we can know what the seeds we plant will produce. That is the very point Jesus is making in this first parable. This parable is in the middle of several in which Jesus uses this theme of planting seeds. The first parable in the chapter discusses God spreading seeds on different types of soil representing different kinds of people, and illustrates the right mindset we need to have to live into the kin-dom he offers. He then tells us that our light needs to shine like one on a hill, not one under a bushel basket. That leads us to this first parable in today's reading.

This is how our light shines.

We plant seeds.

We get involved with the people and the world around us.

That may look like evangelism, introducing others to what this kin-dom of God looks like, how this kin-dom life should be lead.

Often, planting seeds may look like being the light of Christ in the darkness of the world around us. It could be something as simple as saying “Good Morning!” to someone we pass on the street. It could be giving a dollar to the homeless person at QFC and wishing them a “blessed day.” It can also be more substantial efforts, like our Thanksgiving Baskets, or the toys we gather at Christmas for the Salvation Army. The point Jesus is making is that we may never know how our seeds develop and we shouldn’t worry about whether we meet with immediate success. We’re simply called to keep spreading the seeds, and nurturing them the best we can, and God handles the growth, in the proper way and time.

Too often though, we look at the world in which we live, and feel we can’t possibly make a real difference. The problems are too big for any one person.

That’s where our second parable today comes in. Jesus tells us that one of the smallest seeds, the mustard seed, can create one of the largest shrubs, one that can give shelter to birds and animals of many kinds.

Mark’s version of this parable differs from the same story in Matthew and Luke.

In both of those versions, the mustard seed grows into a full tree, while in Mark, it stays just a substantial shrub. From a biblical scholar point of view, I tend to

favor Mark's version. Mark is the oldest of the Gospels, and I think it is a little closer to the reality than the other two. Matthew and Luke's versions seem to want to make a stronger connection to our Ezekiel text this morning, where Israel's redemption is imagined as a grand, towering cedar.

The kin-dom that Jesus ushers in is one of service, of humility, not the grand kingdom that Judaism expected to immediately occur with the coming of the messiah. Mark's parable makes this lesson more approachable for us as individuals. We're not called to plant seeds that produce mighty cedars, though that may occasionally happen. What we are called to do is continue to plant our own small seeds, which with God's help grow into these large sheltering bushes, that provide safety and security for little groups of God's beloved. Each bush is not a towering accomplishment, but if we plant fields of seeds that grow into bushes, put together they can provide for multitudes.

There's the story of a gardener who, once prompted by curiosity, counted 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, the 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. Many other species of plants far exceed that increase. If the seed of a mustard plant can produce that kind of result, IMAGINE what the Spiritual seed that God gives us can do!

While our seeds may seem small, the growth that God can give them can be limitless. And while these images of seeds and bushes and growth are lovely

metaphors, how does this translate into real life? What does it really look like to “plant seeds?” Well, our first clues are in the earlier verses in this chapter I alluded to earlier. We need to be the receptive, fertile ground that germinates the seeds that God through the Spirit sows in us. We need to keep ourselves focused and open to the Spirit’s leading, not the leading that we get from the powers and the principalities of the world. We need to let the light of Christ shine from us, not hide it in isolation under the bushel baskets of silence and solitude we make for ourselves. We need to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the world. We need to be a presence outside our own comfort zones. We need to keep collecting food for the hungry and gifts for the less fortunate. We need to do what we can do for the youth of our community whose childhoods are much different than those we were fortunate to experience. And perhaps most important of all, we need to be voice of Jesus in this troubled world in which we live.

We need to speak up against injustice, speak truth to power. We need to counter the public narrative that says our scripture and our God stand for denying food to the hungry, refusing shelter to the refugee, that our Savior supports policies that separate children from their parents to put them in literal cages. We wonder why our pews are empty yet what “gospel” message are people hearing the most? Is it one of hate, of greed and selfishness, of intolerance and cruelty. Or is it one of love and caring, of open arms and open hearts?

The spiritual landscape in our country is becoming a barren wasteland. Will we choose to be God's gardeners? Will we choose to scatter and sew our mustard seeds to spiritually replant this desert land?

There is a prayer vigil at 7 PM on Monday night at Normandy Park UCC, for the 206 asylum seekers at the Sea-Tac detention facility who have been separated from their children. I'll be there. Will you? If not, what other seed can you plant? Perhaps a vigil at our own church? Or a benefit concert for organizations that provide support to these families? How can we plant our seeds together? I pray that we can work together to find ways to make our world the lush garden, the mustard patch, it was meant to be.

Amen.

Hymn: You are salt for the earth – 226

Benediction:

May God's love be with you as you sow seeds of justice and peace along the paths you will travel so all may know the promise of God's true gospel.

Amen