

Take a look at the front of your bulletins. You'll see in the middle of the cover the antiphon for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost: *"It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High."* And at the end of that sentence, you will see a period. That period is roughly the same size as a mustard tree seed.

As you can see, Jesus was not kidding when he said it was the smallest seed you plant in a garden. The mustard tree can grow to be 20 feet tall and 20 feet in diameter. About the same size as an apple tree. Yet a mustard tree seed is roughly 1/10 the size of an apple seed.

As someone who almost became a biochemist, I am simply amazed at the amount of chemistry that occurs in this tiny seed. In fact, it happens in any seed. The fact that the mustard tree seed is the size of a grain of sand only makes it even more remarkable.

And it happens without a laboratory. Without a scientist and equipment. In fact, it happens without a farmer or a gardener or any other person causing it to happen. All over the world, mustard trees drop seeds on the ground which germinate, sprout, grow, and blossom into huge trees big enough for birds to build nests in.

Jesus uses the mustard tree seed as a parable in our Gospel lesson for today. There are actually two different parables going on here, but their themes are so closely linked that you can almost combine them together into one big parable. The parable of the seed.

And in both of these parables, the seed represents the Kingdom of God. Jesus says that over and over again. *"This is what the kingdom of God is like... What shall we say the kingdom of God is like..."* He's trying to illustrate the characteristics of the Kingdom of God.

The funny thing about this method, though, is that you really need to know what the Kingdom of God is in order to understand the characteristics He's describing. It would be like me saying, "Brown. Warm. Soft." What am I talking about? A blanket? My hair? A squirrel? Once you know what's being described, the words are really helpful in building a picture of it in your mind. But without a reference point, they're just random words.

That's what we often face in Jesus' parables. Jesus says lots of parables about the Kingdom of God. But if you don't know what the Kingdom of God is, they're pretty much useless. His disciples often found that out. But fortunately, as our text says, Jesus would regularly take them aside and explain what he meant.

In a way, He does the same for us, as His disciples today. Because at a couple different places in Scripture, Jesus clarifies what the Kingdom of God is. In Luke 17, he says, *"the Kingdom of God is in your midst."* Again in Matthew 4, he tells us, *"the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand."*

Simply put, Jesus himself is the Kingdom of God. His ministry is the Kingdom of God. Wherever Jesus is found, that's where the Kingdom of God is. Wherever the forgiveness of sins is being preached through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that's where the Kingdom of God is. Wherever God's Word is found, that's where the Kingdom of God is.

The Kingdom of God surrounds Jesus. It surrounds the preaching of the Gospel. It surrounds His Word and Sacraments. Everything Jesus does is about bringing disciples into His midst, so that they are in the Kingdom of God. And everything we do is about bringing disciples into Jesus' presence, so that they are in the Kingdom of God with us.

We saw that in our Gospel lesson last week too. Jesus is inside a house teaching a crowd of people. And his mother and brothers show up outside, demanding that he come out to them. And when Jesus hears about it, he says, "No. I'm already with my family. The people he stay close to me, who listen to me, who sit in my midst – these are my family. These are my kingdom."

Which means that anytime we gather to hear God's Word, we are in the Kingdom of God. Anytime we baptize someone, infant or adult, we are bringing them into the kingdom of God. Anytime we kneel at this altar to receive Christ's Body and Blood, we are kneeling within the kingdom of God.”

So now we can look at these two parables in a different light. The Kingdom of God is like a seed. The sharing of God's Word is like a seed. And it's like a seed in two different ways.

First, it grows without our effort. It is like a plant in a garden. Sure we can plant it and we can tend it. We can water it, weed it, fertilize it. Do all sorts of things to encourage and support its growth. But ultimately, the growing itself is out of our hands.

We cannot act like a scientist in a laboratory, controlling every single chemical reaction that makes that plant grow. It just happens. It is an act of God. Completely out of our control. We cannot make faith grow in a person's heart. We cannot make someone believe the Gospel.

We participate in it, sure. We baptize and we teach and we preach and we reach out in love. We do the planting. We do the tending. We do the harvesting. But God does the growing. And that's out of our hands.

And, as a side note here, I'll mention that for the parents, and especially the fathers, in our congregation on this Father's Day, that you especially need to heed this message. Because the day your child is born, God hands you a vast field waiting to be planted. And a huge barn full of seeds.

And an instruction to go start planting. Plant that seed of God's Word in your child's heart as often as you can. You can't make that seed grow. That's God's work. But you can plant it. And you can plant it often. And you can pray for the day when God brings forth from your child a huge harvest of faith.

So the Kingdom of God is like a seed in that way. But the Kingdom of God is also like a seed in that it's a tiny gift with a huge potential. It is a mustard tree seed. It is so small that if you weren't looking for it, it would be invisible.

The Church and it's ministry is insignificant in the world's eyes. They look right past it. They look right through it. We might as well be invisible to them.

And Jesus' ministry was a perfect example of this. He was a king. And yet He had no armies at His command. Just twelve ordinary men who probably smelled like fish. He had no land at His disposal. His own hometown of Nazareth rejected Him and kicked Him out when He started preaching there. His followers were not rich or powerful or famous. They were tax collectors and prostitutes and sinners.

And Jesus himself? He was nothing to look at either. He was arrested and He didn't fight back. He was spit upon and beaten and insulted and He didn't say a word. He was executed like a heinous criminal and He just... died.

There was nothing about Jesus to make Him attractive to us. Nothing to make Him stand out. Nothing to make Him impressive. He was a mustard tree seed. And like a seed, He was buried in the ground and forgotten.

But that's where this parable gets interesting. Because up until this point, it has largely been a parable about lowering your expectations. You think you're going to do some great work for the Kingdom of God? No. You're going to do nothing. You're going to plant the seed of God's Word and you're going to wait. You think you're going to see or do or be some great, impressive thing in the Kingdom of God. No. You're not going to see anything. It's utterly insignificant.

But... it does grow. It grows slowly. It grows at God's pace. It grows in the way that He wants it to grow. Because He is the one making it grow. But it does grow. And when you plant it, you have to plant it with hope and a prayer. Because you – personally – may never see the end results of planting it. You have to look at that tiny seed and see in it the great tree it can become. Because it may take years and years to get there.

When you plant God's Word in a person's heart you plant it with that attitude. You plant it knowing that what you've said is a tiny, tiny thing. A thing so small, it is easily overlooked and ignored.

And yet, what you've said has the potential to grow into the largest, most fruitful tree of the garden. It has the potential to change their life and the lives of everyone they know. And like Christ Himself buried in the ground, it has the power to bring new life from death itself. And so, even though you can't see it, those simple words matter. They are not so insignificant as they might seem.

Because those words, they aren't you're words. They're God's words. And this is God's seed. Which God will cause to grow. Just as he grew a tree from the cedar branch in our Old Testament Lesson.

Ezekiel tells us that God would go to a mighty cedar, the tree of Jesse, the nation of Israel itself. And He would take from it an insignificant branch. A husband and wife named Mary and Joseph. And He would plant them. And from them would grow a new cedar. The most splendid that had ever been seen. The Savior Himself. Jesus Christ.

The Lord had spoken. He would do it. And He did do it. It took 500 years, yes. He never promised He would do it quickly. He just promised it would happen. And it did.

That's what the Word of the Lord is. It's hope. Hope beyond simple words. Hope not for what is. But what can be. What will be. We serve a God with the power to cut down and raise up. The power to destroy and the power to bring new life. The power to raise Jesus from the dead. And the power to raise us from the dead too. Amen.