

Mark 4:26-34 - <sup>26</sup> He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. <sup>27</sup> Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. <sup>28</sup> All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. <sup>29</sup> As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

<sup>30</sup> Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? <sup>31</sup> It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. <sup>32</sup> Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade.” <sup>33</sup> With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. <sup>34</sup> He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

*It doesn't look like much...*

*To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father – to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.*

*(Revelation 1:5b-6)*

“It doesn’t look like much...” What follows that phrase is usually a sales pitch. “It doesn’t look like much, but it’ll get you from A to B,” the used car salesman promises. “I know it doesn’t look like much, but with a fresh coat of paint and some French doors over there, this space could really come to life,” so say the HGTV expert house-flippers. It doesn’t look like much...but here’s why you shouldn’t dismiss it. We usually use that line to preface something we know to be good and great, but perhaps the other guy needs some convincing - when something, by all appearances, seems unfit for the task or unable to deliver on some awesome promises. Do we ever feel like we need to talk that way about the word of God, or the kingdom of God? Jesus sure didn’t – and in our gospel lesson today, he’s got no shame in saying it.

**What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it?** As is always the case when Jesus asks questions in the gospels, he’s not looking for information. If he gave the disciples an honest crack at that question, *What is the kingdom of God like?* they’d have to answer – “I haven’t got a clue!” The kingdom of God is no ordinary kingdom – there’s no territory, there are no armies, and there certainly isn’t an impressive looking king. With all the ideas about the Messiah as a political Savior floating in the air, it was crucial for the disciples and it’s crucial for us to understand just what Jesus is talking about. So when he asks today, *What is the kingdom of God like?* let’s listen to Jesus answer his own question. And he does. Jesus answers his own question with two parables, or stories, to drive home a couple of truths about God’s kingdom, the sphere of influence of his love, in our hearts and lives.

Jesus said, **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.** This is the kingdom of God Almighty we’re talking about – to what shall we compare it? A dominant military force that sweeps across the globe? A way of life that’s so engaging and successful that its adherents are the envy of all their neighbors and the best and brightest of society? To what shall we compare the kingdom of God? How about a seed. Admittedly, it doesn’t look like much – small, unimportant, seemingly powerless. But watch what happens. **Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how.** The kingdom of God is like seed scattered on the ground that takes root, sprouts, and grows. When the word of the gospel is proclaimed; when that message of Christ crucified and risen to pay for every one of your sins is preached into your ears and planted into your heart, what happens? Well, what happened with those scattered seeds? They did what seeds do – they grew.

But how? The man who scattered the seeds didn’t know. Quite frankly, the growth of anything from a seed is still kind of a mystery. Sure, we can observe the germination and the sprouting, but the whole idea of life and power being pent up in such a tiny little seed that looks so unimpressive and sits on a shelf in your shed for months is still pretty remarkable; almost unbelievable. And it grows! **All by itself**, Jesus said. When that seed is planted, the power is in the seed, not the soil. OK – I get it – water and sunlight and temperature are all important, but where’s the power? The seed contains life hidden within something that doesn’t look like much. What’s the point? The word of God doesn’t look like much – a pastor preaching about a promise on a page – but look again, and see that the seed of God’s word contains life and power in what looks unimpressive. In one of his letters, St. Peter said, **For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of**

**God.** When that living and enduring word of God, the good news of the gospel, is planted, what happens? The seed goes to work doing what seeds do. They grow. You can trust that the seed of God's word will accomplish what he desires.

I don't pretend to know all the challenges of being a modern American farmer, but from what I gather there are many. Rising costs, lower returns, buyouts and bankruptcy – all of that swirling around the farmer's head as he looks at a hopper full of seeds and an empty field of tilled dirt. I bet more than once, the thought rolls through his mind, "Is this going to be the last go round for me? Is it really going to pay to plunk all these seeds into the ground and then just wait? Can I really trust that these will do what they say they'll do?" Have you ever had similar questions about the seed of God's word? It really doesn't look like much, that's what the devil wants us to think. It's sad to say that sometimes his arguments start to sound pretty solid. *This is the eternal God of the whole universe, the creator of all things – if he's going to reveal himself to the world, don't you think he would want to make more of a splash? You really think you can trust what the word of God says simply because it claims to be the word of God? You can't honestly believe that your sins are actually taken away just because that guy up front said so!*

Suddenly the gospel seed doesn't seem so certain for our status with God. It doesn't look like much and, frankly, when I look at my life it doesn't seem to be doing too much. So, maybe we try to plant some other seeds that we think will yield a bumper crop. Unfortunately, some of these seeds have been sown in the name of the church – like the seeds of obligation. You follow this list of requirements for your life and you'll grow; after all, it's up to you. You want to grow? Then you need to pray harder, and if it's not working you must be doing something wrong; after all it's up to you. You want to grow? You need to get in touch with your emotions, your inner voice to tell you if you're a good Christian or not. Not hearing anything? Listen harder. Still no? Then you must've really messed up because, after all, it's up to you. Don't misunderstand me. Striving for order in life is a noble goal, but it doesn't cause growth. Praying is a gift of God and emotions are a blessing from a God who created us as emotional creatures, but on their own, they don't cause growth. Here's the bottom line - anything that turns me toward myself for growth and away from the cross and empty tomb of Jesus Christ isn't the seed Jesus is talking about.

So where does that leave us? Does the church look defeated? Do you feel defeated? Then look again at the promise of God who says, **[My word] will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.** You can trust that the gospel seed of God is doing his work. That's what the man who scattered seed in the parable was doing. **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.** He planted the seed, and was content to leave the growth up to God. That's it? It doesn't look like much, Jesus! But it really shouldn't surprise us that God delivers his greatest gifts through means that don't look like much. In a stable in Bethlehem, there was a baby – completely dependent on his parents – but here's the Almighty taking on human flesh, to take your place. On a hill called Calvary, there's a man who surely was the Son of God – dead, for you. In a garden tomb in Jerusalem, there's an empty slab and some burial cloths, but no body – assurance for you, that Jesus rose from death and your sins are dead and gone. So, it really shouldn't surprise us that God delivers his greatest gifts through means that don't look like much. Through water and word, divine adoption papers are signed in the waters of Baptism. Through wafer and wine, the Son of God gives and pours out his body and blood for your forgiveness. Through words of promise, *as a called servant of Christ and by his authority, I forgive you all your sins.* It doesn't look like much, but attached to these words are the promise of God Almighty.

When God delivers his greatest gifts through means that don't look like much, stand in awe of the amazing results. **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 seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the**

**largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade.** The seed is planted, it takes root, and it grows into something magnificent, all by God's doing. Trust in God's promise to work through his word, even if it doesn't look like much to the outside observer. Take that seed of the gospel good news and plant it – in yourself. Rejoice to hear and learn the word of God here in worship, in Bible study before church, and at home, as you listen to the voice of your Good Shepherd. Take that seed of the gospel good news and plant it – in your children. God bless you, 21<sup>st</sup> century parents – it's tough! Parents want to plant a lot of seeds for their kids – seed money for college, seeds for a successful career with opportunities I never had, but those things fade away. Plant the only seed with eternal impact and the seed that God promises works – the gospel message of sins forgiven and heaven won. Take that seed of the gospel good news and plant it in your relationships, and watch God make it grow – forgiveness with your spouse, patience with your friends, and peace in times of trouble. How? Not with the power of positive thinking or premise of personal improvement, but with the promise of your Savior who gives us his word and promises that it will accomplish his purposes.

Every Wednesday morning at 10:15 am, we have our early learning center chapel service, and I get to share the gospel with a large group of little people. Sometimes it gets noisy. Sometimes it seems like all the babies are crying at the same time. Sometimes the preschoolers are off in outer space or right in their neighbor's face. And I'll be honest, sometimes I wonder to myself, what's the use? Shame on me! I could tell you stories of interactions I've had with kids and parents...and not just the ones where the kids see me and call me "Jesus" or "Chapel." One little boy would sit right in front and when I mention the name of Jesus, he'd shout, "*Pastor, did you know that Jesus is actually God?!'*" To which I'd respond, "Why yes, Zachary, I did. Thank you." What seems to be a simple statement that we might take for granted is a statement that gets a ringing endorsement from the Savior himself. Remember when Jesus' disciple, Peter, said something similar? Jesus asked, "**Who do people say the Son of Man is?** And Peter gave his bold confession, "**You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.**" Jesus followed it up, "**Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.**" The seed was planted, and God is making it grow. If you've got time on Wednesday, come to chapel at 10:15. That little boy I mentioned doesn't come to Hope anymore, but come by and hear another miracle of God – come hear the voices of fifty kids shouting, "Jesus died on the cross to take away all of our sins, so now we can live forever in heaven!" The seed of God's love in Christ has been planted, even in the littlest ones, even in you. It may not look like much, but the word of God is working and it works!

Amen

*To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.*

(Jude 24-25)