

Mark 4:26-34

I spent five years with the farmers of South Dakota in my first Call. I learned a lot from them. I learned a lot about their pace of life, driving five under the speed limit on the highway. I could never quite catch onto that one. I learned about stopping to say “hello” to that old neighbor at the gas station store. I learned a little about farming too.

When the time is right, out they go. To ensure the soil is ready, to set their drill to the right depth for the seed. And so they planted. And then they went back to the shop and they fired up automatic crank system that turned and pushed the plants up out of the ground...

No. they didn't do that. They rose up, they went to sleep, they did some spraying I suppose. But the plants just came up. It's what the plants do. What the farmers did do, I can confirm, was a whole lot of worrying and complaining about the weather. “There's no rain! There's too much rain!”

And it's easy for us to laugh about, or maybe not with water regulations going out around these parts, but the reality is, I have never known what it's like for my livelihood to be based on things so much out of my control. And yes, there's crop insurance, and what not, but I also think farmers farm because they like watching the crops grow and so they worry they might not.

And, yes we know the biological mechanisms that drive the growth, but do you think the farmer in Jesus' parable didn't know the need for rain, for good soil (Jesus already told us about the soil in Mark in the parable of the sower). Did this farmer not know about sunlight?

He knew those things, we do too, but it doesn't change the fact that the farmers in South Dakota or this one in the parable, *didn't make the crops actively grow by their own effort*.

Which means it is out of their control. And when things are out of our control, we worry. It's the same for all of us. With the news from the doctor, for the people you love travelling, the economy, the world powers – there is so much we don't know, so much we can't control.

However, the point of Jesus' parables today are not to give us more reason to worry. It is to take that worry away. Because, in the parable... the crops do grow! It's how God made it to work, it's what God made them to do, and so they do.

And so now this thing out of our control, *the Lord invites us to find rest in*. Plant the seeds, and let God do his work. And if you can trust God does his work well, then this all being out of your hands is a good thing, because it is left in capable hands. I am not in control of the nuclear reactor, or the airplane, or the open-heart surgery. That's good news! You want those left in the more capable hands of the engineer, the pilot, and the surgeon. They can handle it. God can handle his business too, specifically, his harvest.

Yes, Jesus reminds us today: his hands are capable.

This is a Kingdom parable. So it isn't just about us not worrying about our health scares or travel plans, though I think this does inform that. It is primarily about God's Work in the world to yield a harvest of eternal life. And the message is there: sow the seeds (proclaim the Word) and let God give the growth. He has promised that seeds will grow and bear fruit. He has promised his Word will not return empty and that it endures forever.

And yet... we see pews shrinking across America. We see strife and war, we see people we know chasing after false prophets and crystals and pure naturalism. "God, are you going to keep that promise to yield a great harvest?"

Even in the Church, the harvest, there are hypocrites, abusers, division, and infighting. We wonder, "God how capable are your hands, will you keep this promise?"

Which is why, I think, Jesus offers the parable of the mustard seed immediately after the parable of the automatic growth. The mustard seed parable, we know it applies to faith: faith so weak, so small can well up to everlasting life! He says just that in Matthew 17. But notice this particular usage of the mustard seed, in Mark 4, is not actually a depiction of our faith, it's a depiction of the Kingdom of God. "With what can we compare the Kingdom of God... it is like a mustard seed."

Yes, the *Kingdom*, the Church, looks so small and insignificant. It's shrinking in our lands, it's divided, and its people are sinful, hypocritical, and weak. And they die at the same rate as all the others. Churches have 12 people in them, theres one with 5 here in our East Idaho Circuit. Maybe God's hands aren't so capable afterall...

It's no different in Jesus' ministry. So small! 12 fishermen and nobodies and tax collectors start wandering around some tiny country in the world. No palace, no throne, no army. So small, so insignificant, so meaningless. The Leader gets killed. Hung to a cross. The followers left despondent and scattered. Not even worthy of more than a footnote in history.

But then Jesus rises. Yes, as Jesus says, a grain must go into the ground, and then rise up bearing abundant fruit! And that is something significant, isn't it? Something new.

Something world changing! And if he is victorious over death just as he said, are his nail-scarred hands competent enough to guard and guide his Kingdom?

And if those nail scarred hands save a congregation of 100, of 12, of 5 – if those nail scarred hands save one, just one, sinner and give them eternal life – has not something monumentally amazing happened? World changing. Eternity changing!

Jesus is risen over the grave. Are those nail scarred hands capable of bringing us, and so, so, so many more into something so great we can't even imagine it? Yes they are. And can we trust that he is doing that, even now, around the world, as many birds from many lands come to nest in the shade of his kingdom? Yes! May God help us to trust and rest in that truth.

We pastors are the worst at this. We long for measurables and statistics. And there is a place for them in that they reflect individuals whom Jesus loves and cares for. But we despair when attendance is low, we are desperate to find a crank that we can use to make the seeds grow. And while we certainly should present the word, plant it, in faithful, hopefully not too boring or trite or silly or caustic, ways - the reality that Jesus teaches today is that it simply isn't up to us to make it grow.

He will do that while we rise and sleep. He will give the growth.

So I think Jesus gives us a little reason to rest today with these parables. A little reason for grace. He is at work. And if you look, you'll see the mustard seeds. The Church growing in

the global south. The refugee crisis bringing in thousands to the faith. The shift here, towards a more biblical Christianity. But leave all that aside if you want and simply look in the mirror. And there you will find one person, only one, you. And you may see scars, and wounds, and blemishes of sins and shame. But has not his Word and Work come to that person in the mirror too?

That person baptized in Christ, who confesses his name, who receives his gifts? You, yes you, are the one. The one whom God would die for. Who the nail scarred hands hold. They will hold you fast, they will wash you clean, they will make you a new creation, and will accomplish in you something eternal and world-changing!

Rejoice in that, rest in that. It's God's work to save and keep you saved, not yours. He will grant the growth. And you may feel small and insignificant at times, but don't worry, that means you are perfect for God's Kingdom of mustard seeds. A Kingdom that, thanks to His Work, will and already has, changed everything. Amen.