

7.24.22 – Pentecost 7
“Mustard Seed Growth”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Mark 4:26-34 (NLT) ~ Pam

Parable of the Growing Seed

²⁶ Jesus also said, “The Kingdom of God is like a farmer who scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, while he’s asleep or awake, the seed sprouts and grows, but he does not understand how it happens. ²⁸ The earth produces the crops on its own. First a leaf blade pushes through, then the heads of wheat are formed, and finally the grain ripens. ²⁹ And as soon as the grain is ready, the farmer comes and harvests it with a sickle, for the harvest time has come.”

Parable of the Mustard Seed

³⁰ Jesus said, “How can I describe the Kingdom of God? What story should I use to illustrate it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed planted in the ground. It is the smallest of all seeds, ³² but it becomes the largest of all garden plants; it grows long branches, and birds can make nests in its shade.”

³³ Jesus used many similar stories and illustrations to teach the people as much as they could understand. ³⁴ In fact, in his public ministry he never taught without using parables; but afterward, when he was alone with his disciples, he explained everything to them.

L: These are the Words of Jesus. C: Thanks be to God!

Matthew 13:31-32 (GNT) ~ Pam

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

³¹ Jesus told them another parable: “The Kingdom of heaven is like this. A man takes a mustard seed and sows it in his field. ³² It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it grows up, it is the biggest of all plants. It becomes a tree, so that birds come and make their nests in its branches.”

L: These are Picture Words to Instruct us! C: Thanks be to God.

Please pray with me:

Creator God, we thank you for our time together this morning. As we continue to study the parables of Jesus, we ask you to stimulate our imaginations, clarify our thinking, nourish our souls, and bring us closer to you in the material. Strengthen our hope and faith to know that even though our church and faith may be as small as a mustard seed, you are much greater, and you work through us to build your kingdom right where we live. Lord, may we be attentive today and every day, listening for your direction as the Holy Spirit leads. Now speak through this message. Amen.

Please remember that you have an insert with instructions for your summer parables study. It has some homework for you to do; and then let me know how your daily devotionals go using these exercises. It is for

our spiritual development as well as for this church, as we “Listen for the Work.” We are seven months into the year, and God is revealing his direction to each of us in diverse ways. Please use this parable method and the prayer tools for the next five months of discernment, and then please share your insights with me!

Most of the time we hear people use the phrase “the size of a mustard seed,” we hear them describing **faith**, as I did in our prayer. That comes from Matthew 17:20. I did not hear or study the word faith used directly in either passage today, yet in the Mark first selection, it is assumed that one must have faith to grow any seed. And preparation, hope, and patience. I imagine that at least one of you (besides me) have had seeds that you planted that did not bear fruit or flowers. Today’s parable, however, as told in all three synoptic gospels is Jesus’ describing the Kingdom of God to the crowd and the disciples. You may notice that contrary to the last couple of week’s parables, this does not have an explanation for the disciples. Jesus **is** however still using familiar life examples like plants, seeds, and birds to illustrate his complex teaching. For children in Sunday School, the mustard seed is a favorite parable and object lesson.

The first Mark section of our reading today talks of the seed growing of its own accord (God determines the **results** of our seed planting, we do not) and the time of harvest (which refers to the Last Judgment). Growth of the seed into a plant and a spirit into a mature Christian come not from our efforts but from the miraculous work of God. Spiritually speaking, the harvest is when the effects of preaching and teaching will bear fruit and be revealed. We must use our intellect

and willpower to be disciplined learners, but the harvest and reign of God is mysterious and fruitful as **He** declares it, not us! Let us do our part, of course, and trust in God's plan for this church and for us personally.

Jesus refers vaguely to an Ezekiel passage, 17:22-24, where the prophet plants a branch of a large cedar tree, and slowly it grows into a large tree in which birds build nests. Nature does nothing abruptly (even hurricanes and storms take time to build). This seed story draws on that comparison of familiar cedar tree and mustard seed for showing the mystery of growth by God's creative hand. In our story, although the black mustard seed, popular because of its spiciness and oil in the Mediterranean, is very small (0.039 to 0.079 inches), as you can see the yellow mustard seed on the bulletin cover photo, and it grows into plants that are between 8 and 15 feet tall! The branches are surprisingly strong, and the flowers provide shade for birds to nest in. Black mustard can also grow by the roadside as a weed, so it is a free medicinal and herb source. Jesus used this new illustration based on the Ezekiel familiar prophetic passage and common sightings of cedar tree growth.

The best mustard seed is an annual plant and must be resown and tended the next year. This story had two purposes: first, to encourage the disciples and us that size does not matter to God. Even though there were only twelve disciples at the time, Jesus knew that this movement for the Kingdom of God would expand and multiply. ***Hear that church?!*** The second purpose of the story was to remind them that growth is a mystery known only to God, but it does require collaboration between humans and God. Humans must not be arrogant or complacent about their efforts and must do the necessary things to prepare the soil for growth. Then, as we

see slow and steady results of that work (the fruit), do we pull up the tender shoots to see how or if they are growing? No, that will kill the new plants! We must leave that to God's supernatural power, having faith and trust that we did the preparation, and He will do the miraculous.

The analogy is evident also in conversions, baptisms, and belief. We must do the work to grow the church by preparing ourselves to share testimony and the Gospel with others. We must utilize our gifts of hospitality to welcome guests; and we must prioritize repairing and refreshing the old buildings and grounds for new Christian service and new people of all ages and current tastes. After we plant the seeds through invitation and outreach, then continue to fertilize the soil with service and fellowship, we must **trust** that God will provide the supernatural growth His Kingdom demands. Innovative programs or new staff will not "fix" any church's situation; only the love and grace of God as shown through people and relationships will. The old metrics of numbers and noses or people in the pews do not apply to church growth anymore; read any articles or listen to podcasts and you will see the changing demographics of our secular world. Metrics (or measurements of success) have changed as we are changing through service, outreach, lives influenced, stories heard, stories told, hearts opened, opportunities for growth granted, disciples commissioned, and gifts given are a few of the "fuzzy" measurements we now use to determine our church's "success" and "growth."

We must also be ready for the harvesting work. The metaphor is about abundance of food and resources, the growth of the church toward kingdom harvest, and especially the eternal life given to those who

believe in Jesus because of his sacrifice on the cross. That eternal life is not something we wait until we die to achieve. That eternal life is a quality of living in the world now with kindness, love, mercy, and grace.

Planting a mustard seed is all RISK! It is seemingly insignificant, but the reward of such a large tree is monumental! Growing a church is all RISK these days, but the fruit and the results are eternal (even if we do not ever see them – as in Hebrews 11, the heroes of faith never saw their results). The Kingdom of God in these stories is not some powerful despot or ruler; the Kingdom of God is like a small, humble herb that enhances food and life. The Kingdom of God is Service! Are we looking for a powerful Christian Nationalism to take over the world? **NO!** This Kingdom belongs to God. If we are true to our faith, we are willing to work, no matter our age or physical condition – there is prayer, Scripture reading, reading to children at Amerikids, filling a bird feeder, pulling some weeds; there are phone calls to make and notes of encouragement to send. There is wisdom to share with others. God will reward this work too. We are Baptists because we are willing to work together; we associate with others to do more than we can alone. Our small seed efforts become huge plants of shelter and provision, so never criticize what we cannot seem to do. Remember, that is why we participate and collaborate with other groups like ACCA, FACETS, NorthStar, BGAV, BWA, CBF, BJC, NBMBC, Amerikids, Zion, Washington Concert Society, etc. Go to our Missions Page for a fuller list of our Community Partners. We are mustard seeds in the process of mysteriously growing and influencing our world for the Kingdom of God. Praise the Lord for

this preparation and work! Have faith, patience, and trust God in all things. Amen! //

Will you pray with me? Lord, help us to be aware, serving, patient, and trusting disciples. You have sowed the best seed for us, so let us be faithful in preparation and stewardship waiting for the harvest. Help us to share the gospel with others, so that they may know you. Encourage and build our strength to serve you in new ways. Let us not be discouraged by the small size of our seeds. Give us direction, oh Lord, **Amen.**