



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Faith in the Ordinary”

Mark 4:26-34

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Mark 4:26-32

²⁶ [Jesus] also said, ‘The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.’

³⁰ He also said, ‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³²yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.’

³³ With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Parables will always be open to new interpretations. The word “parable” itself comes from two Greek words: *para*—as in parallel—means to put something side by side; *balo* means to cast or to throw. A parable casts two images side by side.ⁱ Think of something as simple as parallel lines. The two will never meet. Likewise, the parables and that which we put alongside them may never meet either, but there is a constant alignment that forces us to go back and forth between the two. When we look at what happens in the story and what happens in our own lives, we go back and forth



between the two. And this back and forth—this cyclical comparison—never grows old, and over time we begin to see new things.

Jesus loves to speak in parables. Most of them are left uninterpreted in the gospels, as if they're invitations for us to take the story into our own hands—to take on the responsibility for figuring out what to do with it. They are an invitation to wrestle with the parallel comparison of story and real life. It's an opportunity to find something new each time we cast the two images side by side.

Mark 4 is Jesus' first long series of speeches in the gospel. If you were to locate our verses in your pew Bibles or your Bible at home, you would see that these stories are only two in a long series of parables describing what the kingdom of God is like. *“The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground.”*

One year for Father's Day, my dad got a packet of wildflower seeds. He let my brother and me cast them alongside the walkway at our lake house. We scattered them and left them. We didn't prep a flower bed; we didn't weed or fertilize. And come the next summer, that walkway was strewn with black eyed Susans, daisies, and purple coneflowers. We were 9- and 5-year-old gardeners. We neither tended nor stressed—we cast without care.

The average gardener, however, plans, prepares, plants, and worries. My husband Chris bought and spread two skid steer scoops of compost before we planted a single tomato in our garden. Every day, he checks on the garden—is it getting enough water? Have the rabbits discovered it? Has our dog dug anything up?

The gardener in Jesus' parable is a bit more like the kids my brother and I were. He scatters, then he sleeps. He does not plan or slog or worry one jolt.

In the second parable, someone sows a tiny mustard seed in the ground, and it grows into a gigantic bush, large enough to offer birds shelter in its branches. The joke here is that people in Jesus' day did not plant mustard seeds. While some varieties were used as spice and others medicinally, in general mustard was considered at the very least pesky and even somewhat dangerous—think kudzu. It would take over a garden. Wild mustard is not an attractive plant. It grows like a weed, and it looks like one.

We tend to focus on the seed in Mark 4. But as we cast the parables again and again, one point that appears is the emphasis placed on the soil, the ground, the earth. In the first parable, the soil has a power that even the sower doesn't understand. The kingdom of God is both prolific and hidden, both generous and mysterious. It works its fertile magic underground, deep beneath the surfaces we can see and quantify.

Come to think of it, there's not a lot of human work in either of these two parables. Seeds that grow—totally on their own. They “sprout and grow, [the sower] does not know how.”



I recently learned the video gaming phrase the “sweaty try hard.”ⁱⁱ The sweaty try hard is when you’re working really hard to beat the game and do well. It’s a way to describe a player who’s pushing with all they’ve got, super focused, determined to make every right move. We all know people who approach their faith this way—maybe we have been that person. The one trying harder and harder, never feeling like they’re doing enough.

Jay Bakker is the adult son of televangelists Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker. In an interview, he shares that he spent summers at church camp. At some point each session, a Bible verse memory contest would ensue. No matter how hard he tried, he was always his team’s downfall. Given his heritage, the other boys on the team would expect Jay to be their ace in the hole—after all, who should be able to recite more memory verses than Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker’s son? But Jay is dyslexic, and no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn’t commit the recall of Bible verses to memory.

This is just one of the ways he tried and felt like he failed to live up to the expectations of God. He got things wrong time and time again. Jay was taught that God was judgmental, always keeping score. He came from a culture of sweaty try hard Christians, who try as they might, were putting their efforts in the wrong things. As a young adult, Jay rebelled against his parents’ theology and understanding of salvation. But he didn’t run away from faith for long, because, as he says, he discovered the joy and freedom in God’s grace.

Jesus’ parables fly in the face of the sweaty try hard, the linear progression, the ideal of control, the idea of effort equals reward. Jesus says, the way God works in your life is like seeds that grow and you have no idea how they’re growing.

These parables appear for a group of believers who are anxious. Mark seems to have been written for a community unsure of how to respond to the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.ⁱⁱⁱ They were likely torn between whether to take up arms in the revolutionary cause or to be subject to Roman authority. Wondering what kind of witness to bear in a landscape of devastation, Mark is offering a third way. In the dramatic and subversive turn they see in Jesus, God is offering a way of getting along in the world that’s deeply self-giving (following Jesus to the cross) and deeply trusting in the faithfulness of God to work out God’s promises.

Jesus is offering a way that is both fearless and faithful.

The good news, the kingdom of God, the gospel, is like a mustard seed—the smallest of all the seeds—coming out of the backwater town of Nazareth, heralded by an itinerant rabbi. When buried in the ground, it becomes the greatest of all shrubs. It puts forth large branches not only so the birds of the air can make nests in its shade, but so you can hang your life upon it. That’s what the kingdom of God is like. It comes to you not because of anything you have done or could do, but from outside of you. It is so insignificant until it is realized. When that Word hits your heart, you’ll hang your whole life on it.



It's no coincidence that the teller of this parable comes to earth as a tiny, forgettable "mustard seed." A backwater baby born into poverty.^{iv} It's no coincidence that his first followers are raggedy fishermen and corrupt tax collectors—uncertain, timid, doubtful, unimpressive people. Could it be possible that God's kingdom rests on folks like these? Absolutely.

If we're having trouble resting in God's care, then perhaps it's because we discount the small, ordinary seeds. The seemingly insignificant places where the earth shifts and the "weeds" grow.

The kingdom is like a very small seed, often overlooked, unremarkable. It appears in the parts of your life that are not the things you're most proud of—but when it comes, it takes over everything. When you know you're forgiven and you're loved, when you can live with the joy that is knowledge and faith in God's grace, unmerited grace, it changes everything.

When that seed is buried, it most certainly rises. That resurrection takes over—for there is not one square inch of this world which the Lord Jesus Christ does not declare beloved and his own.

It's a tiny, tiny movement in an unimportant part of the Roman Empire. In three short centuries, it will completely transform the known world. The Caesars of Rome cannot stand against it. Because of it, we care about things like human rights, justice for the oppressed, freedom for captives, lifting up the lowly. Because of it, we know we are created out of goodness and for good in this life.

Jesus is the tiny seed nobody thought mattered at all. He planted himself in the ground. He died and was buried. As a result, the tree that has grown has transformed and is transforming the whole world.

"The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground,²⁷ and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.²⁸ The earth produces of itself ...³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth;³² yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Amy-Jill Levin and Sandy Eisenberg Sasso. *The Marvelous Mustard Seed* (Flyaway Books: Louisville, 2018).

ⁱⁱ Jacob Smith and the Rev. Aaron Zimmerman. "Pentecost 3 (B): Beauty Pageant in Bethlehem." *Same Old Song*, June 7, 2021. <https://thesameoldsong.fireside.fm/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rolf Jacobson, Karoline Lewis, and Matt Skinner. "#788: 3rd Sunday after Pentecost (Ord. 11B)." *Sermon Brainwave*, June 7, 2021. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/788-third-sunday-after-pentecost-ord-11b-june-13-2021>.

^{iv} Debie Thomas. "The Sleeping Gardner." *Journey with Jesus*, June 6, 2021. <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=3036>

