

North Kildonan United Church

13th June 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

“Like a Mustard Seed”

II Corinthians 5: 6-10, 14-17

Mark 4: 26-34

Gracious God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may hear your Word with joy. Amen.

In his commentary on the Gospel of Mark, Tom Wright translates the beginning of today's passage this way:

"This is what God's kingdom is like," said Jesus. 'Once upon a time a man sowed seed on the ground. Every night he went to bed; every day he got up; and the seed sprouted and grew without him knowing how it did it. The ground produces crops by itself: first the stalk, then the ear, then the complete corn in the ear. But when the crop is ready, in goes the sickle at once, because harvest has arrived.'

Even though we are in the middle of the planting season, our passage is not about Jesus's approach to farming or gardening. There's got to be more to it than that.

Those first listeners must have also thought that. *We know how to plant and grow a crop, so who is this carpenter from Galilee giving us the basics of horticulture, they may have said to one another.*

But maybe there is more to it. Yes, they knew the farmer needed to get seed onto the ground, trusting that the seed will become grain. So the seed grows in secret, being a seed it germinates and starts to reach through the soil, towards sunlight, then beyond the soil, all the while the stalk develops and the head appears and the grain within the head grows until harvest time.

They had experienced the same phenomena every year. That's how they had wheat for bread. *This Jesus isn't telling us anything new. Nope, nothing new here, or is there?*

For the people listening to Jesus, all they got were parables, but as Mark tells us, when Jesus was in private with his disciples, he explained everything to them.

But let's keep with the crowd who only got the parable. Something Jesus said sounds familiar. As Tom Wright translates it: "But when the crop is ready, in goes the sickle at once, because harvest has arrived."

Some who were listening that day might have remembered where they had heard that text. In their Hebrew Scriptures, in Joel, chapter 3, verse 13, it says: *"Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe."*

If they remembered that passage, they would have also known that Joel was speaking of the coming Day of the Lord, when God would restore the fortunes of God's

people and judge the opponents of the people of God. A promise the people were eager to see fulfilled, as they suffered under Roman oppression. God would vindicate Israel they believed, and rightly condemn all those beyond the fold. This is what they hoped for, but Jesus was preaching a different kind of judgement, a judgement that included all, a judgement not based on vengeance and getting even, a judgement tempered by grace and filled with hope and new beginnings.

So Jesus let them ponder what the sickle and the harvest was all about.

But there is another aspect of this parable that may have led some of them to scratch their heads in bewilderment.

Jesus says the farmer goes to bed and gets up, goes to bed and gets up, night and day, yet still doesn't know how the seed sprouts and grows. But of course the seed is doing the same thing as the farmer. It sleeps in the soil and gets up. Sounds like the rhythm of God's creation. Night and day, seedtime and harvest, the cycle of the day and the year.

Some of those listening might have thought about Noah and the Flood and God's promise afterwards, as in Genesis 8: 22 *"As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease."*

But the meaning is deeper, for Jesus goes on to compare a mustard seed to the Kingdom of God. Tom's translation again:

"What shall we say God's kingdom is like? What picture shall we give of it? It's like a grain of mustard seed. When it's sown on the ground, it's the smallest of all the seeds of the earth. But when it's sown, it springs up and becomes the biggest of all shrubs. It grows large branches, so that the birds of the air make their nests within its shade."

Laid in the earth and then arises, or "when it's sown, it springs up". This is a resurrection reference, which people would understand, but they would see resurrection as how God will restore Israel's fortunes, and as part of that blessing, the saints of old would be raised to life.

So what's it all about? We don't know how Jesus explained the full meaning of today's text to the disciples, but we might glean some understandings.

People expected great things from Jesus, dramatic and powerful things. But the Kingdom of God is not about a dramatic clash of arms between the powers of light and darkness, or God and the world, or of overthrowing the Romans and restoring the good old days. Other Messiahs promised that sort of thing but Jesus didn't. And perhaps many people looked down on the ministry of Jesus because it was not what they expected.

The kingdom of God, Jesus' ministry, had small beginnings, humble beginnings if you will. But from that would grow the Church, which would spread around the world and span the centuries. Perhaps there is a warning within this parable, a warning to not look down upon small beginnings.

Think for a moment about John and Charles Wesley, two brothers, both ordained, both restless with the established church of their day. Each morning they met for prayer and study and sought out the will of God for their lives and for the church. Those observing them and their methodical practices would sneer and insult them by calling them Methodists. From their simple beginnings grew the Methodist Church, a global church and in Canada, a denomination that would be the largest church to enter into the United Church in 1925.

In a very real sense, the Methodist movement began just like mustard seeds. John and Charles, each converted in 1738, and their increasing band of followers trusted in God's providence and grace, and they endeavoured to live lives that reflected the power of the gospel in their hearts. They had no standing in the church, though they were both Church of England clergy and to his dying day John would maintain that there was a place for Methodism within the Church of England. They were not allowed to preach in the Anglican churches so John would gather followers together and hold services in places like cemeteries, climbing onto the tallest tombstones so all could hear. Each year John rode countless thousands of miles by horseback, preaching throughout the United Kingdom and bringing countless people to Christ. Charles was a phenomenal hymn writer, and I look forward to the day when we can sing *Love Divine, All Loves Excelling*; *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*; and *Rejoice, the Lord is King*, just to name 3 of his 4,500 plus hymns.

It was not unusual for hooligans to disrupt these services. When the Methodists build *The New Room* in 1739, their chapel in Bristol, England, the pulpit was placed well above the floor, at gallery level, with no access from the main floor. Otherwise, it was not uncommon for the preacher to be pulled out of the pulpit by these same hooligans. Can't say I've ever feared that happening to me.

From a tiny mustard seed to a massive shrub, that's how Jesus pictured God at work in the world. From simple beginnings can come great ventures.

That vision has spurred countless faithful people to dream dreams, to do outreach and ministry, *to seek justice and resist evil*, as A New Creed puts it, to risk and labour for the kingdom. That same vision would have been within the hearts of the founders of North Kildonan United, more than 60 years ago, encouraging them to sacrifice and work and plan and hope for this congregation and this church home, a vision we continue to this day.

A minister I knew was very fond of the words of William Carey, who was a Baptist minister in the late 1700s, words we might take to heart.

"Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God!"

Amen.