



Sunday June 16, 2024
Mark 4:26-34 (Fourth Sunday after Pentecost)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompanado

Last week, Pastor Chris, Pastor Edwin, and I were at JOLT Adventure Camp with Jeana Wagner and a bunch of Jr. High students. Now, Pastor Chris and I have been doing this for quite a number of years, even before both of us came to Ascension, so needless to say it's a pretty well-oiled machine.

Two years ago, we brought Pastor Edwin into the mix, and he's been a really great addition, but one would think that the newest amigo would be eager to jump in and learn the ropes...one would think, right? Well, let's just say amigo #3 has chosen a very "unique" way of "jumping in".



Okay, I'm sorry for the detour but I just couldn't resist. However, I'd like to you keep this image in the back of your mind because we'll come back to it a little later.

My wife, Lori, has always loved gardening. Me...not so much. Over the past few years, she's designed and maintained some *beautiful* flower beds around our home. But, for quite some time now she's been wanting a vegetable garden. So, for Mother's Day I built her some raised garden beds and together our family planted a bunch of our favorite vegetables.

And although I've never really enjoyed gardening all that much, ever since then I've developed a bit of an obsessive habit of checking on our new plantings several times a day – do the leaves look droopy, are there weeds that need pulling, are we watering too often or not enough?

I know myself well enough to know that if I could force those plants to grow and thrive by some fool-proof combination of hard work and sheer willpower, I would. If you didn't know this about me already – I like having control. I like guaranteed results. I like knowing that if I do A, then B will happen.

It's an ideal I impose on many areas of my life. Work, marriage, parenting, friendship. The ideal of control. The ideal of linear progression. The ideal of defined labor and tangible reward. Of course, the inevitable result to this ideal is anxiety. Am I doing enough? Have I covered all the bases? What will happen if I fail? Thankfully, my ideal is not God's.



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In the first parable in this week's gospel, Jesus tells of a gardener who scatters seed on the ground, and then goes off to sleep. The seeds fend for themselves and when the grain is ready, the gardener harvests it. 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.

Both parables, as much as they're meant to show us what the kingdom of God looks like, are counter-cultural to the point of almost sounding ridiculous and to some degree they don't make any sense. But the bottom line is, they're intended to stretch our imaginations far beyond any place we'd take them on our own.

Let's start with the sleeping gardener. Now, if you have any workaholic or perfectionist tendencies, then you immediately know what's wrong with this first parable. Good gardeners don't simply toss a bunch of seeds into their backyards and then siesta through the growing season. They plan, check, and linger. They make neat little rows in well-maintained beds. They closely monitor the weather. They protect their gardens from birds, rabbits, deer, and anything else that would destroy them. From early spring until harvest time, they water, fertilize, prune, weed...and from time to time they even worry.

But the gardener in Jesus's parable? He sleeps. He doesn't micro-manage. He doesn't second-guess. Instead, he just enjoys the rest that comes from leaning into an ancient, mysterious, cyclical, and certain process. He trusts the seeds. He trusts the soil. He trusts the sun, the shade, the clouds, and the rain. Sure, he participates in the process by planting and harvesting. He pays attention to the seasons and gets to work when the time is right. But he never holds onto the illusion that *he's in charge*; he knows that he's operating in a realm of mystery.

And in today's story of the kingdom of God, it's not our striving, our goodness, our faithfulness, or our impressive prayers that cause us to grow and thrive in God's Garden. It's only by God's grace.

Which brings us to the soil. According to Jesus's parable, the kingdom of God is both rich and hidden, both generous and mysterious. It works its fertile magic underground, deep beneath the surfaces we see and try to manage. While the soil eventually brings forth abundance, the process of that – all the essential details we long to dissect and master – are hidden from our eyes.

There are many areas in my life where I struggle to trust the soil. Where I try to control all the variables – essentially refusing to let God cultivate them in God's care. I try to justify this refusal as being prepared or cautious, but in Jesus's gardening metaphor, it's a lack of faith. It's my futile attempt to play God.

The truth is, it's difficult to surrender my imagination and my control to God's expansive and life-changing care. It's hard to loosen my grip, to trust and accept mystery, to seek God in the ordinary, and to



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embrace the unknown. But the challenge nevertheless remains for us to scatter seeds of faith, hope, kindness, and love and then wait and rest in God's grace.

One of the things that Jesus' parables point to is a need for a larger imagination – an expansion in our way of thinking rather than attempting to define it precisely. God is infinite and creative, always doing the unanticipated thing in unexpected ways. Rather than locking us into one way of thinking, Jesus is trying to open our eyes, our hearts, and our minds to new possibilities and greater and more expansive ideas.

And certainly, the two parables that we encounter in today's gospel help us to understand just that. No one can anticipate what the harvest might be at the time seeds are scattered on the ground. The mustard seed, the smallest of seeds, doesn't reveal, at first sight, the size and possibility of the plant that will grow. Even the gardener doesn't know how it happens. We see that things happen, but we don't know exactly how, we simply need to trust that they do.

The stories in today's gospel reveal that the kingdom of God comes, without any working on our part to make it happen, and completely outside of our anticipated outcomes, and yet it comes anyway. God is at work, even when we don't see where or how or why. And the outcome is much greater and more expansive than we could ever imagine.

Of course, this is the very nature of God that's being described. God is gracious, extravagant, and abundant. God is connected to the renewal and restoration of creation. And God is always active and involved in the unfolding of this kingdom even when we don't see it or understand it.

The disciples throughout the gospel of Mark definitely didn't see it or understand it. They remained clueless to the end, even after Jesus was raised from the dead. They didn't understand and were afraid most of the time. And while there may be far more to these parables than meets the eye, let's also remember that the disciples had Jesus with them, explaining everything to them, *and they still didn't get it*. And if this is the case, then how could we hope to be any better than them?

We don't have to be – at least not according to these parables. God is bringing his kingdom to fruition, despite our lack of participation or understanding – even though we don't always get it, and even when we do, we often get it wrong.

Jesus speaks in parables as compassion to us. He tells us enough to get us on board, to keep ourselves open for a different world in which the kingdom of God will most certainly become the reality for all creation, even though we don't see it at any given moment. And you and I – *we* participate in that vision as we grow in God's love and live in God's forgiveness *despite our sinfulness*. And so, for now we're simply called to live in the midst of it.



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I have to admit – all of this is difficult for me – and perhaps it is for you too. We want to understand, we want to know, we want to see. And yet our capacity for *fully understanding* is just too small to take it all in. So, for now, we just have to trust that without our knowing or understanding, God’s kingdom is taking shape. God’s name is being glorified. And God’s will is being done. I think what all of this means is that we must live in faith.

Although we can’t know the immediate outcome, we’re still called to stand in faith and trust that when we invest our lives in living according to God’s will for us and for the world, what we’re doing is the right thing and will eventually bear fruit – even if we cannot see it. It means persevering in love and kindness even when we can’t see the point. And it means trusting that God is constantly working in and through us.

My friends we are called to simply trust that what may look small and ineffective to us now, will become something greater than we could ever imagine. And in trusting we begin to participate in the very kingdom of God that’s already here – growing and transforming the world into the one whose full greatness is yet to come.

Remember the picture I showed you at the beginning of my sermon? Well, I wonder if now, in light of today’s gospel, we might reconsider Pastor Edwin’s posture a little bit differently. Maybe now we might see him looking less like the sleepy and disinterested gardener in today’s story and more like the wise and faithful one who is simply relaxing because he has so much trust in God’s grace and the coming kingdom of God. And, perhaps all of us could learn to follow his example a little better. Thanks be to God. Amen.