

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Ezekiel 17:22-24

Psalm 92:1-4, 12-15

II Corinthians 5:6-10 [11-13] 14-17

Mark 4:26-34

06/16/2024

### **Gospel**

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark:

26[Jesus] 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." 30He 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." 33With 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.

The Gospel of our Lord

### **Prayer**

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

## **Hidden Growth and Tree That is Really a Bush**

Good morning! If you drive by Crummitt and Son, the family business in Martins Ferry, Ohio, you will notice three buildings that run along the railroad tracks on one side. On the other side is a street that runs slightly angled and so the very end of the land runs to a point, much like the property here at St. Paul's which also comes to a point where Mercury and Gildner meet, except more acute. That little section runs with a significant elevation change for such a small area and so it was left for the wild animals and plants to take over. It had always been there, and when I was young it seemed like a little area of bushes and rocks. But as I got older and nature continued to take over, I noticed that those little bushes had become a tiny little forest, filled with tall trees and healthy plants. No seed or fertilizer was ever used, in fact, people had probably gone out of their way to make sure nothing really survived! It had all happened right under my nose, without me ever realizing.

The same growth is used in today's Gospel reading too. In fact, we get two awesome stories from Jesus. The first parable, which as we discussed last week, literally translates as "shadowy things," tells us about seed scattered on the ground. The second is the parable of the mustard seed, a classic biblical tale. It shows up in all three of the synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In the past I have talked about my inability to make anything grow, so you would think that I would have trouble resonating with the texts today, but for some reason I really enjoy them! The parable of the mustard seed is especially a favorite of mine. Maybe because the plants don't require care from anyone in order to survive. Those are the perfect plants for me!

The first story discusses a farmer who scatters seed across his field. He gets up early to check the seedlings and goes to bed late after he checks the progress. He has no input, it's up to the earth to facilitate the growth. He anxiously watches them sprout, agonizing as it grows ever so slowly! First the tiny little stalk sticks up out of the ground. Then after an agonizing time the head shows up, and finally it finishes and is ready! The second the grain is ready the farmer rushes to harvest! Rushing into the field with speed and determination.

Our second story is, as I said, a Gospel classic. But you'll notice that it differs a little bit from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Instead of Jesus incorrectly saying that the mustard seed grows into the greatest of trees, he talks about how this tiny seed grows into a glorious shrub for all the little critters to make their home. Which is exactly correct! At its tallest the bush only grows to something like 15-20 feet. What's interesting is that the language used is intentionally different. Several times in Scripture Israel's kingdom is referred to as a giant tree. So the listeners would have been expecting Jesus to compare it to some massive and strong thing. Instead he uses a shrub. One scholar writes that "*... it must have seemed contradictory to use the image of a bush to represent the kingdom of God.*" But Jesus is a tricky one. And it's why I love this story.

First, Jesus is intentionally avoiding tree comparisons that would seem to compare God's kingdom to any earthly rule. And second, Jesus picks a bush because it protects the most vulnerable of animals. Think about it, the shrubs and bushes are where the tiny birds nest. It's where rabbits and small game hide. Jesus is making it clear that those who need the most are the ones that are welcomed into God's kingdom. Scripture continually lifts up

the poor, the widow, the orphan, the alien, and the prisoner. These are those who can find safety in what God is building.

Which brings us back to the first parable. Growth is sometimes so slow that it feels imperceptible. It makes it feel like nothing has happened, or that nothing IS happening. Time has stopped. It's also scary to realize that the growth is out of our hands. But the story today shows us that even before we see any signs of life, God's kingdom has already taken root.

The lesson is twofold. It reminds us that while we may have a part in the process, it's God that does all the really important work. As St. Paul writes, "*I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.*" It's out of our hands. All we can do is wait for the times when God tells us that things are ready. The lesson also gives us hope. Sometimes that growth is so slow that it seems like nothing is happening. It can feel demoralizing and daunting to look around and think that your ministry hasn't made a difference. But that's just not true! The harvest takes time, and the produce will eventually come.

C. Clifton Black finishes his commentary for today's lesson with this, and it is here that we'll end too. "*For all their obscurity, one thing is clear from the parables in Mark 4: Jesus' claim that God's sovereignty undermines all human notions in the most preposterous manner... A seed explodes, its fruit matures, without the slightest cultivation. The smallest of seeds becomes the biggest of vegetables. Such images don't clarify; they shock. Those receiving such instruction remain comically stumped. The kingdom of God does not operate in accordance with received opinion and the violence of this world's principalities. At every point it upsets conventional wisdom, turns, and defies it again. If only we will surrender*

*ourselves to such a God... Divine mystery cannot be solved. Our responsibility is to proclaim and to hold onto it.” Amen.*