



A Joyous Kingdom
Ezekiel 17:22-24; Mark 4:26-34
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (June 13, 2021)

The saying goes, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”

The Chinese proverb offers wisdom in those times when the task at hand seems too overwhelming and out of reach.¹ It has certainly helped me to calm down and break huge projects into smaller steps or to find the confidence necessary to undertake a complex task.

I’ve noticed how elementary school children here do even today what I did as a child in Italy. To explain how plants grow, teachers instruct the students to plant a small seed in a clear plastic cup or in a wet towel and watch it grow.

Enthusiasm and expectation grow over days and weeks as the seed rots and a small leaf starts to sprout. This exercise helps as the children learn the parts of plants: seed, roots, stem, and leaf. As we get older, we get more sophisticated in our ability to explain the details of the plant and the growth we see, but on some level the growth itself remains a mystery. Why do some plants thrive and others fail? Was it the soil? Too much water? Too little? Too much or not enough sun? And what of those plants growing in the tiny cracks in between slabs of concrete?

The growth of faith is, similarly, mystery. We can do the best we can to provide good soil, in the form of teachers and mentors, parents and pastors. Still, the faith seems to take root and grow in some people and not in others. And then there are people raised in the worst conditions who grow to be strong people of faith.

Jesus reminds us that faith is a gift which comes to us from God. We cannot control it in ourselves, and we cannot control it in others. The gospel of Mark seems to suggest that we can plant the seed, water it, suspend any anxiety as we go to sleep and then one day wake up and be pleasantly surprised to find the plant grown.

Perhaps.

Back-of-the-mind questions still bother our sleep though: Will anything grow? When? What shape will it take? Will it be strong and healthy? It’s hard to give up control even as it impairs our sleep! We pay so much attention to the harsh inner critic and worry about the future. Is that, perhaps, because we fear other people’s criticism? Are we allowing others to define who we are?

Perhaps the parables’ invitation is to trust in the backstage divine support meant to alleviate us of any over-emphasized personal responsibility in producing faith, any self-serving pride any self-congratulatory pose and assurance of having had any impact whatsoever on someone.

¹ Chinese proverb, attributed to Laozi.



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And what if things don't go well and there is no growth?

Self-beating with discouraging put-downs can only produce unhealthy and disruptive bitterness. Parents are constantly concerned about their children's faith. Pastors are worried about parishioners. In the end, it is God who provides the faith growth, and the Holy Spirit decides the timing and the shape that it will take. We worry and ask whether our children will ever have faith. Maybe what we need to worry about is whether our faith will have children.

Self-assessments are important but, in the end, we are responsible for ourselves and entrust others to God. We are called to be faithful messengers and clear-sounding instruments of the mystery. It is not our responsibility to provide the faith. The way we live our faith will encourage it in others or prevent others from trying the journey along with us.

The two parables Jesus presents in a few lines in Mark's gospel with the purpose of illustrating the kingdom of God are counter intuitive. (PHOTO 6: THE SOWER) In the first parable, a gardener scatters seed on the ground, and goes off to sleep. The seeds fend for themselves and, when the grain is ripe, 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.

If you ask a farmer, the parables make no sense. They do not reflect agrarian economy and they would never cross a farmer's mind. But that's what parables do: They're big, cosmic jokes, intended to stretch our imagination and prime our mind to new possibilities. What is the kingdom of God like? Are you sure you want to know? Okay, brace yourself: the kingdom of God is like a sleeping gardener, mysterious soil, an invasive weed, and a nuisance flock of birds.

Good gardeners don't toss seeds onto the ground and then snooze away the growing season. They plan and plod. They are conservative with their seeds making every one of them count. They are concerned about the weather. They protect their gardens from birds, rabbits, and deer. From early spring until harvest time, they water, they fertilize, they prune, they weed, and they worry. Their family's future depends on the success of their work and on a good season.

The gardener in Jesus's parable sleeps. He doesn't slog. He doesn't micro-manage. Instead, he enjoys the rest that comes from leaning into a process that is ancient, mysterious, and cyclical. He participates in the process by planting and harvesting but he never harbors the illusion that he's in charge. In this story of the kingdom, it is not our striving, our piety, our doctrinal purity, or our impressive prayers that cause us to grow and thrive in God's garden. It is grace alone.



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In Jesus's second parable, a sower sows a mustard seed in the ground. The joke here is not only that mustard seeds are tiny, but that people wouldn't purposely plant a nuisance weed. It would be the same as planting dandelions. So, what is Jesus saying when he describes the sacred and the holy as a tiny, insignificant mustard seed? What does it mean to take an invasive weed, a plant we'd sooner discard than sow, and make it the very heart, the very structural center, of God's kingdom? Who and what counts in God's economy? What is beautiful? Who matters? Where do we see the sacred?

In the reading from the prophet Ezekiel, people in exile were comforted by the words that describe God's intention of making big what is small and giving height to what is low. In the gospel, Jesus goes one step further and talks of something insignificant and unwanted according to common logic and makes it a sign of the kingdom. With this image Jesus insists that the ones at the margin of society, those we think of as undesirable, a threat, and an embarrassment are the ones God lifts up and blesses.

As someone has suggested, "the kingdom of God is all about welcoming the unwelcome. Sheltering the unwanted. Practicing radical inclusion. The garden of God doesn't exist for itself; it exists to offer nourishment to everyone the world deems unworthy. It exists to attract and to house the very people we'd rather shun. Its primary purpose is hospitality, not productivity."²

By the time the gospel of Mark was put together, there was much social unrest with all sorts of groups challenging Roman authority and occupation.

According to the different points of view, we may have liberation fighters or home-grown terrorists. The incendiary atmosphere exploded in the destruction of Jerusalem, in persecution and crucifixions, and expulsions from the synagogues of anyone who would attract the occupiers' attention or suggest unorthodox and deviant piety. Comparing the kingdom of God to a tiny seed that develops into a generous, welcoming, and protective tree conveys the necessary hope for the vulnerable Christian community to endure and to thrive during dangerous times.

As people of God, we are called to trust that God will do, in God's good time, what we cannot. The kingdom of God is not something we need to strive for, as I think the parable of the mustard seed teaches us. It is freely offered and already available. What is asked of us is contentment, gratitude, and courageous endurance. As the kingdom grows in us we grow with the kingdom without forcing the time nor wanting to control the outcome. A small, generous step taken in joyous accord can bring life to those around us. At times we are the birds taking shelter in the shadow of the tree; at times we are the branches offering hospitality to the weary ones. All the time, we are the soil receiving the seed of the Word of God, becoming the dark womb of the

² [Journey with Jesus - The Sleeping Gardener](#)



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earth incubating hope and truth for ourselves and for the world. We assume a docile attitude of trust even as the road ahead looks strenuous, and fatigue and discouragement slow down our progress. We act and walk by faith and not by sight as the apostle Paul reminds us.³

Where is the Spirit calling your ministry to walk by faith?

Are you called to advocate for refugees and immigrants? Have you checked what the Lutheran Refugee and Immigration Services ([LIRS](#)) is trying to do on behalf of Afghan allies who have served side by side with our troops, diplomats, and other government employees? These allies and their families soon became the target of anti-American violence. They continue to be threatened, abducted, targeted, and killed for their allegiance to the U.S. and NATO mission. Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service has joined veterans' groups, human rights organizations, and members of Congress in calling upon the Biden administration to urgently evacuate American-affiliated Afghans and their families. You may write to the White House through the LIRS website⁴ or contact the White House directly (202-456-1111).⁵

A little closer to home, Nativity is fundraising for our annual Migrant Families' Children's Shoes and, before the opening of the school year, some of us will join Resurrection House (better known as Rez House) a mission church of the FL-Bahamas Synod in Dade city, to spend a few hours assisting children shopping for shoes at a local Walmart. Rez House children were with us in the past for our summer Vacation Bible School (VBS). If you want to join the shopping children this August, leave a note on the pew card.

God is gracious and welcoming, a shelter to those in need and generous towards all. Let us rejoice and be glad. Amen.

³ 2 Corinthians 5:6-7

⁴ [Join LIRS in Calling on President Biden to Protect Afghan Allies](#)

⁵ [Write or Call the White House | The White House](#)