

The Rev. Mary Haggerty
St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church – Florissant, MO
3rd Sunday after Pentecost, June 13, 2021
Mark 4:26-34

I love visiting my kids and grandkids in Denver and Chicago. I look forward to these visits and I make sure not to let too much time pass between them. It's one of the reasons I said yes to a part-time position here at St. Barnabas'. This way, I can be your priest and I can be their mom and grandma at the same time. So, I wouldn't trade my visits to the kids for anything. But there is one thing about these visits that drives me crazy. They don't watch the news. They don't have cable and most of what appears on the TV screen only appeals to anyone 5 and under anyway!

But I have discovered that they do keep up with the news of what's going on in the world. They get their news from Steven Colbert and John Oliver and Trevor Noah. They get their news in the form of comedy. These comedians take the often bizarre stories of our day and they comment on them through the lens of satire. They point out the irony and the inconsistencies all around us.

I wonder if that is what Jesus is doing with the parable we hear this morning, the familiar parable of the mustard seed. Imagine if you were part of the crowd of folks following Jesus around. You have been held under Roman rule with plenty of injustice and corruption for as long as you can remember. Your family and friends have suffered and now, this itinerant preacher is promising victory over the evil you have seen entirely too much of.

You would expect him to compare this victorious reign of God with the tall, stately cedars of Lebanon, the lofty trees that the prophet Ezekiel makes reference to this morning. But instead Jesus says, "The Kingdom of God can be compared to a mustard seed." Now this is not

the kind of crop people would want to grow. Mustard was prolific. It was a common and sturdy weed that could pop up anywhere and it multiplied fast. I can imagine some of Jesus's listeners laughing or groaning at the irony of his comparison. Mustard is no cash crop that is going to bring prosperity to anyone!

Jesus goes on to describe the fully grown mustard plant as "the greatest of all shrubs." The theologian Matt Skinner says, "at this point, some of his auditors probably snorted and blew milk out of their noses."¹ This plant Jesus refers to, the common black mustard plant is not a magnificent specimen. It looks like a green tumbleweed with flowers on it. Jesus had to be grinning when he said this. He clearly was not talking about the relative merits of various shrubs. He was trying to shock people into a new way of perceiving greatness.

The folks listening to Jesus were waiting for a Messiah who was going to wage military victory over Rome. They were waiting for "great" leadership, and a "great" display of power. And *then* God's kingdom would come. Isn't that just like us? What are we waiting for, what answer or program or leader or powerful moment are we waiting for? And *then* we will know that God's kingdom will come.

What is the magic number of people in the pews that will convince us that the kingdom has come? What is the dinner or party or program that we used to do that we must bring back to believe that God's Kingdom has come? What is the ideal average age of our parishioners that will allow us to truly grasp that God's kingdom has come?

Here's the funny news flash: There isn't one!

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-11-2/commentary-on-mark-426-34-4>

Jesus is telling us that the Kingdom of God, this little hidden subversive seed, is right here among us. The Kingdom of God is hidden in the most unlikely place: In the ordinary circumstances of our everyday lives. That doesn't feel particularly great, does it? But that is the surprising Good News that Jesus proclaims. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Not in some grandiose fashion but in the ordinary, quiet beauty of our day to day lives.

I saw the Kingdom of God this morning as I was driving out of my neighborhood. I live in an old neighborhood with narrow streets that were built before we all had multiple cars. That means that we have to be aware of one another as we navigate the neighborhood. We have to watch for one another and pull over to let one or the other of us pass. And it happens regularly. In this fast-paced, watching-out-for-#1, individually-focused world we live in, every day someone I don't even know pulls over to let me pass. And then we wave at one another. Nothing great. Just a quiet, beautiful moment of recognizing our interdependence and giving way to it. What if that grows into recognition of others who aren't like me? What if that grows into giving way to someone with a different opinion or skin color or level of education or status? What if that tiny seed of graciousness grows into a huge bush that can provide shelter and shade and food and a home for others?

Jesus is asking us this morning to have a change of heart. He is challenging us to look at the world through a different lens. He knows the lens that we see through is always going to be a bit foggy. The fullness of the Kingdom of God still awaits us. And He knows that if we will laugh along with him at the seeming absurdity of God's dream, our hearts can be changed even through the fog. Especially in the foggy, ordinary days of our lives.

This morning I hear Jesus saying to us, "Don't worry about being magnificent. Be ordinary. Be yourself. Stay close to me. Clean your glasses so that you can notice the seeds that

are scattered right at your feet. And then, let them grow into a big, tangled, flowering bush that speaks of my love and my shelter for even the least among us.”