

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Jesus uses a lot of parables involving plants, and we get two of them in today's Gospel reading. I want to take them each in turn to see how they might connect with our lives, both as individuals and as a congregation. Both parables today are about the kingdom of God. The first is about the sower who sows seeds and then comes back and they have grown, he doesn't know how. On first blush, this is a pretty unremarkable parable, because, yes, that's exactly how agriculture works. You plant seeds. You wait. And then plants happen, assuming you've had rain and sunshine in the right proportions.

Helen and I are gardening again this year, after taking last summer off because of our long absence. And as you know, we're not the best or most diligent of gardeners. But we did manage to get in a bunch of tomato plants, some peppers, some squash and cucumbers and some herbs. And we got the soaker hoses put in the gardens and hooked up to a timer. And we got the gardens mulched. That was more than a month ago now, and we haven't really done much at all since then. And the plants are growing! All by themselves. Like plants do. But as I was thinking about how to get across what Jesus is doing with this parable, another experience that I had came to mind that really drives home his point with me. It might seem a strange leap at first, but stick with me. Thirty-eight years ago right about now, I was in the summer break after my first year of seminary and taking a required course of "clinical pastoral education." This course teaches future pastors how to minister to people in clinical situations, like when they are in the hospital. And during this time I had the opportunity to stand in on open-heart bypass surgery, all scrubbed in and standing right next to the surgeon. This was at a teaching hospital in London, so they did that sort of thing. And I had spent some time ahead of the operation reading in the medical library how the surgery was performed, so I had an idea of what I was watching. It was utterly fascinating. But this was my takeaway realization as an observer: surgeons, in and of themselves, don't really heal people. In fact, they do a surprising amount of damage. Let me tell you, using a little radial saw to cut through a person's sternum is shockingly violent. I wasn't ready for that. But that's what you have to do in order to get to the heart to operate on it. And then then they had to cut into a leg to get veins for the bypass and sew them in around the blockages in the heart. And then they closed him up and with staples and stiches. I skipped some steps, but this isn't meant to be a medical lecture. What I also realized when I noticed that surgeons don't actually do the healing is that it is a person's own body that will do the healing once everything is rearranged to solve the problem of the blockages. And as a person of faith, I of course, attribute that to the human body being wonderfully made by its creator. Healing is not something we do by our conscious and intentional actions. We only help to create the conditions for it. Something like growing the tomatoes in our garden.

So now, on to the second parable, the parable of the mustard seed. The lectionary helps us out with this parable by giving us our first reading from Ezekiel. When we read that alongside our Gospel text, it suddenly becomes obvious that Jesus was alluding to Ezekiel in the parable of the mustard seed. So, it helps to know what the Ezekiel text is about. Ezekiel was a priest who lived through a major crisis with his fellow citizens of Judah. This crisis was the conquest of Judah by the Babylonians, which resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple of Solomon, and the exile of its leading citizens, which lasted for roughly half a century. Ezekiel prophesied at the beginning of this crisis, first warning his fellow citizens of the coming

destruction, but finally promising that this crisis would not be the end, but the beginning of something new and better. Our first reading this morning belongs to that last group of prophecies, the promise of new beginnings even in the midst of the crisis.

This helps put Jesus' parable into context and to make it so much richer than the simple story of a tiny seed becoming a giant shrub. Jesus was teaching his disciples in the midst of the crisis of their time, the continuing subjugation of their people to the Romans. The upshot of the parable of the mustard seed is that God is at work behind the scenes to deliver on the promises God has made to God's people. And Jesus has now become the focus and fulfillment of that promise

I hesitate to compare the crises we face in our own time with the troubles of God's people over the more than six hundred years until Jesus' coming, or the two and a half millennia until the present. Obviously, what we face pales in comparison to what they lived through, and died through, generation after generation. But our crises are our crises, and I think these readings have something to say even to us.

Three things, because three seems to be a good number: First, the kingdom of God, God's reign, is for God to bring to pass. It is not ultimately our responsibility. It is not even within our power. *God* is the one making that happen, though the church has sometimes forgotten that. The first parable of the sower and the seeds illustrates this. The seeds turn into plants without the sower's participation beyond the planting of the seeds. We do well to remember that as a congregation as we face the changing reality of the church in our day. Our task is to attend to the seeds of the gospel. When we do that, the kingdom of God that sprouts from the gospel has a way of taking care of itself, of planting its own seeds and moving itself into the future, out of our control.

Second, a little bit turns into a lot. That's the lesson we usually take away from the parable of the mustard seed, and it is not wrong. We have a tendency to look at the problems we face and think we have to come up with a solution to it all by ourselves and then implement the solution ourselves. The reality is that even our very small acts of persistent faithfulness, themselves the work of God the Holy Spirit, will become something big because of God's own faithfulness to us, and because of God's way of turning a little into a lot.

Finally, the kingdom of God does not exist only for our sake, or even for God's sake. The mustard seed becomes a home for the birds of the air. That does not help the sower who sows the seed, or the harvester who reaps the crop. Jesus didn't talk about all the good food you could produce from a giant mustard plant. He mentioned only it becoming shelter for others. And that is something for us to remember as the church as we look to our future. If we think of Grace only as a place that fulfills our own religious and spiritual needs, rather than as a place of refuge and renewal for others, then we might be missing a key component of our calling in God's emerging kingdom.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, our opportunity here and now, in the face of whatever troubles we face, is to grow into our calling, to be renewed by the seed of the gospel planted in us, so that by persistent faithfulness born of the grace of God we might become the beloved community that Jesus intends us to be – to be the little, insignificant group of people who has an out-sized impact on the world around us because we are firmly rooted in the love and forgiveness of God for Jesus' sake. May we take that opportunity, trusting that God is working in and through us. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.