

**Church of the Holy Trinity, Middletown, CT**  
**Steven Horst, Ph.D.**

**Sermon for Proper 6, Year B**  
**Mark 4:26-34 (Planting Seeds, Mustard Tree)**

Jesus seems to have loved botanical metaphors.

He talks about flowers – the lilies of the field.

He talks about trees: fig trees, wild olives, cultivated olives, cedars of Lebanon.

He talks about vines: wild and cultivated grapevines, and Himself as the True Vine.

He talks about weeds and wheat.

And this week, we have grain and mustard bushes, and the seeds from which they originate.

The Kingdom of God is like someone planting seeds, and then the seeds grow on their own into grain, and then comes the harvest.

The Kingdom is like a mustard plant, which starts out as a tiny seed but grows into a huge bush that provides a home for the birds.

Does this mean that, when we get to the afterlife, it's going to look like Nebraska – wheat fields extending to the horizon – or like a giant bush?

No, I don't think so.

These are parables – Images that convey and perhaps even hide a spiritual meaning.

And a big part of that meaning seems to be something like this:

The Kingdom of God is, in short, like a living thing.

We do not build it.

It grows on its own, like a living thing, in ways we do not understand and cannot foresee.

I've been an amateur home gardener these past 20 years, and as I've learned a little bit about plants and gardening, my appreciation of Jesus' parables has deepened.

Let's start with seeds.

I don't plant most of my plants from seeds – I buy seedlings from nurseries.

But I have bought seed packets, and once or twice I've collected seeds from my plants to try to grow them again the next year.

Now, maybe Ash can look at a seed and tell you what kind of seed it is, but I sure can't.

I think the only seed I can identify is a Sunflower seed, and that's only because I buy them at the supermarket.

If I opened a bunch of seed packets on the kitchen counter and spilled them all out, I wouldn't know which was which.

And I think that's part of the point – if you just look at a seed, you don't know what it will grow into.

It's the same with us.

We've baptized two beautiful babies this past month.

You look at them, and you know there's all this potential, but you really don't know who they'll grow up to be.

And we were all that way once – in fact, when we started out, we were even smaller than seeds, we were single-celled embryos that could only be seen with a microscope.

Probably even an expert biologist would have had a hard time looking at one of us in that first moment and even know that it was a human embryo, and not a dog or a cat, much less what we would grow up to be like.

Even Jesus himself was born like the rest of us, and almost nobody had any inkling who he was – maybe his mother and Joseph, maybe Simeon and Anna at the temple, but even they had only a dim conception.

And in today's Old Testament, even the Prophet Samuel, who had begun hearing the voice of God as a boy in the temple, did not recognize that David was the boy that God wanted to be the King of Israel – he assumed it must be his big brother with the broad shoulders – you know, the kind of guy who is captain of the football team.

And that was how the people of Israel had messed up in choosing their first king, Saul – he stood head and shoulders above everyone else, so they assumed he would be a good king, but he was totally unsuited to being a king.

Only God knows our potential.

We don't know what God can make anyone else into – or even what He wants to make *us* into.

And, not knowing this, we can risk putting limitations upon ourselves and others – as Samuel would have done if he hadn't been so used to listening to the voice of God, even when it disagreed with his own judgment.

Like Samuel, we are all inclined to judge by appearances – but God judges the heart and provides the growth.

So I think we are called to look upon others – and ourselves – with hope and prayer and love rather than with judgment.

Judge not that ye not be judged.

But the parables aren't about natural human development, or about who is going to be King of Israel.

They're about the Kingdom of God.

What is the Kingdom of God?

It God isn't a place you can go to, like the United Kingdom, or could have gone in the past, like the Kingdom of Israel.

It isn't a political state – but it is a spiritual state: that state we're in when God reigns as King in our hearts and in our lives.

It isn't something that comes about through natural biological or social development.

It's something that happens through inner transformation through Christ and the Holy Spirit.

It starts out when a seed is planted.

What's the seed?

In the Parable of the Sower in Luke 8, we are told that the seed is the Word of God.

Maybe it was planted when we were reading or hearing the Bible, or in something someone said to us.

Maybe it was in something someone did out of love.

Perhaps it was first planted when we looked up at the sky or at nature and discerned, as the Psalmist puts it, the Heavens declaring the glory of God and the earth proclaiming His handiwork.

Maybe that first moment is one you can still recall, or maybe you've forgotten when the seed was first planted, perhaps early in your childhood.

But if you responded in faith, it took root and began to grow.

Maybe it's put forth fruit.

Maybe it has grown into a great mustard bush, where other people, and even the birds, can find shade and shelter.

Or maybe it's still a tender seedling, just starting to grow in invisible ways.

Maybe other people wouldn't even see it was there.

Maybe on some days you wonder yourself, the way I wonder in early June whether my late-season plants, like the cardinal flowers the hummingbirds love, are coming back this year.

You can't rush it along or make it happen, any more than you can get the plants in your garden to grow faster by grabbing them and trying to pull them upwards.

But, just as with plants, you can make a difference in providing the things that help it grow.

You can water plants when they're dry. You can provide fertilizer, and remove the weeds that threaten to choke them.

In the spiritual life.....You can pray. You can read the Bible. You can meet and worship with others. You can partake in the Sacraments. You can seek to know God better.

And there are many occasions when we have a choice of what to do, and these choices affect our character and our relationship with God.

I sometimes can choose whether to be kind or harsh

...forgiving or unforgiving

...generous or greedy

...loving or spiteful.

And we can be sowers of the seed as well.

As St. Paul says in Romans 10

“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

<sup>14</sup> But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? <sup>15</sup> And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

What is the “fruit” of a stalk of grain but its seeds?

We help to spread the Kingdom of God when we plant seeds...

By telling people about Jesus

By acting in Godly and loving ways that show the fruit of the Spirit in our lives.

Some people, indeed, are like great mustard bushes – just being in their presence, you feel the peace and love of God.

Maybe you’ve known some people like that – even within this very congregation.

Churches, too, can be like mustard bushes, providing a place of shelter and nurture.

Hopefully, many of you come to this place because you are spiritually fed, connect with God, or find a way to express your own gifts and ministries.

And if you're here looking for a church, I invite you to make this your church home.

But Holy Trinity has also quite literally provided shelter for those in need: most recently in the winter warming center for the homeless,

But we were also (in our old building, now Russell Library) the first home for Middletown's public high school.

Our parish hall was an overflow hospital ward during the flu of 1918.

St. Luke's home, which stands behind the church, was founded by Holy Trinity as a home for widows of Civil War veterans.

And many of Middletown's organizations began or operated out of our space. To name a few: Head Start, Oddfellows, the city's first soup kitchen, numerous 12-step groups, and most recently, the Ekklesia Christian dance company.

This is largely how we are known as a church in the Middletown community – it is a part of our witness to Christ, and a way of sowing the seeds of the Gospel.

Indeed, if we were looking for a new and non-traditional name for our parish, I might just suggest "The Mustard Tree."

Jesus' botanical metaphors are very rich – you might even say they grow on you.

We are seeds, or the soil in which seeds grow, or seedlings, or grain, or in some cases great bushes or trees when the Spirit of God is alive in us.

Only God knows exactly what He is growing us into.

So be patient – God isn't finished with us yet.

And we can also be the sowers of seeds, spreading the news of the Kingdom, or gardeners who provide good conditions for seeds to flourish.

So share the faith and love that are within you, love kindness, and walk humbly before our God.