

Miracle Grow

Mark 4:26-34

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There was a preacher who was disappointed at the lack of Biblical teaching from the other churches in town; and he was also concerned that his own congregation was not very knowledgeable when it came to the Bible. So one day he decided he would start preaching from Genesis 1:1, and he would continue each week until he had preached through every book of the Bible. He knew it would take several years, but he was determined nonetheless. He was so excited about this endeavor that he went out and bought a new Bible which he would use just for this extended preaching series.

By the fourth week, the preacher had made it to the account of Noah. And he was reading along in his Bible, "Now this is the account of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God. Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. And Noah had a wife, who was exceedingly beautiful. And she was..."

At this point, the preacher went to turn the page of his new Bible. But since it was still a new Bible, the page that he turned was stuck to the next page. He simply picked up his reading at the top of the next page: "And she was 300 cubits long, 50 cubits wide and 30 cubits high..."

At this point, the preacher looked up at the congregation. He said with his most earnest voice, "Now folks, I honestly believe that every word of the Bible is inspired by God and is literally true. And I have to tell you right now, Noah's wife was a B-i-i-i-g lady!"

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Today's world is caught up in BIG, isn't it? You can't go to a fast-food restaurant without being offered a super-size deal. Bigger is better—that seems to be the consumer's slogan these days. Bigger cars. Bigger houses. Bigger debt. Big is what gets our attention.

We get caught up in numbers games.

Even in the church it's easy to get swept up in the numbers. We compare churches according to the number of members. We have a budget to make, and so we watch the offering plate. We keep track of our worship attendance.

That's why I find it interesting that in the parables that Jesus told for this morning's passage, he doesn't get our attention with BIG, but with something small. Isn't it just like Jesus to turn our world upside down and make us see things from a completely different perspective?

Jesus uses the image of a seed. In the first parable, it is a nondescript seed, maybe a kernel of wheat. In the second parable Jesus refers to the mustard seed. A tiny mustard seed. Here—I have one in my hand. See this? This is how Jesus gets our attention.

In both cases, the seed grows into something much larger. A kernel of wheat grows into a stalk with a head that has many more kernels. It multiplies itself exponentially.

The mustard seed is a tiny seed, yet when planted it grows into a huge bush. More like a small tree. Big enough, according to some commentators, that a horseman could ride underneath its branches.

Jesus is saying that, in the right hands, given the right conditions, the kingdom's potential is unlimited in the hearts of those in whom its message is planted. He's trying to help us understand the

miraculous growth of the kingdom when it takes root in the heart of God's people. In an agrarian economy, it is not surprising that Jesus would use stories about farming. So throughout the gospels Jesus tells parables about fields and plants and gardens and growth.

And including this morning's parables, there is a common thread that keeps coming back to me. It's the soil. So much of the growth depends on the quality and the condition of the soil. In an earlier parable Jesus speaks of four different kinds of soil—soil that is hard-packed, soil that is shallow and rocky, soil that is full of weeds and thorns, and soil that is well-cultivated. And when Jesus speaks of the soil in which the seed is planted, he is referring to the human heart in which God's word is planted.

How does your garden grow? How would you describe the condition of the soil of your own heart?

You see, good soil rarely just happens. For most of us, it takes hard, deliberate work. When I was serving my first congregation as a pastor in North Carolina, every day I had to drive past corn fields on the way to our small country church. I learned a lot about farming by watching as the farmer would first plow up the field, turning over large chunks of earth. Then he would go over the land again and again, dragging the plow disks behind him until the land was fine and smooth. And then he would spread the fertilizer—have you ever driven past a field that's been freshly fertilized?! It takes work to make the soil just right. But it worked. At the end of the season, the corn stalks would have grown to more than eight feet tall. It was an amazing sight.

What have you done to prepare your heart for the growth of God's kingdom within you? What needs to be done in order to thoroughly work your heart into fertile soil?

I know that my soil is always needing a little more work. I still encounter rocks and weeds and hard ground that needs to be worked. One of the biggest impediments for me is the busy-ness of life. Many are the days that I allow the hustle and bustle of life get in the way of my spiritual life. How easy it is for us to over-fill our schedules, or to take our priorities out of order just a little, and the result is we don't spend time investing in spiritual growth like we should.

But when the soil of our hearts is prepared and well-tilled, think of the possibilities! It just takes a tiny seed planted in good soil, and we can experience miraculous growth! God's word, the Bible, is filled with seeds that, when planted in a well-cultivated heart, can bear amazing fruit:

Seeds like, "Come unto me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest", "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...", "Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength...", "I am convinced that... nothing in all of creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord", "The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our God shall stand forever...", "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life..."

Think about the potential that these little one-verse seeds have in a heart that has been well prepared! How does your heart respond to promises like these? Are there still areas that need some work? Of course there are. There always are.

There's something in these parables that often gets overlooked. Jesus tells how the stalk of wheat produces a head with many, many more heads of grain on it. Then he tells about how much the mustard seed grows, to the extent that the plant gets so large that birds come and perch in it. It is a powerful reminder that the kingdom is never meant just for us. The growth of the gospel within us is never just for our own benefit. The true evidence of growth is in the fruit we bear for the sake of others.

Philip Keller says that "the extent to which a piece of good ground has received and responded to good sowing is eventually demonstrated by how little soil shows. The entire area planted will be taken over,

covered and smothered in a luxuriance of green growth. The onlooker will see, not the soil, but the bountiful produce on it.”¹

What he's saying is the evidence that God's word has taken root in our lives is in the fruit that we bear. Just as the mustard plant grew and provided shelter and even food for the birds, so should God's kingdom produce a similar result as it grows in us. We don't grow in our relationship with God solely to satisfy our own desires and our own needs; we grow in our relationship with God so that we can share the fruit with others.

Paul says that the fruit of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. How well does that describe you? How well does the fruit you bear tell the world to whom you belong, heart and soul?

It is possible to experience the miraculous growth of God's kingdom, both in our lives and in our world. The miracle is made possible when you yield yourself to God. And you do that by giving him your heart, and asking God to plant his word in it.

The seed may be tiny. But don't focus on the size of the seed. Instead, take a good look at your heart, and try—just try—to imagine what can take place when you make yourself completely available.

Just try to imagine the possibilities.

Amen.

1 Philip Keller, *The Inspirational Writings* (New York: Inspirational Press, 1993), p. 473.