

Highland Presbyterian Church
4th Sunday after Pentecost – June 16, 2024
A sermon by Megan McCarty

Ezekiel 17:22-24

Mark 4:26-34

If you think that the Bible isn't funny, it's clear that you have not been reading Mark in the original Greek... I imagine that this is a pretty familiar text to us, as these stories appear in all of the gospels except John. In Matthew and Luke, the draw of the parable of the mustard seed is that they say that a tiny seed will grow into a huge tree. It's a wonderful image and it has led many people to say that if you have the smallest amount of faith – even faith as tiny as a mustard seed, you can do anything. And while that may be many people's experience with their faith, the idea of a tiny mustard seed growing into a huge tree is actually quite silly. Mustard plants are about three feet tall and very scraggly. There's nothing tree-like about them.

So, Mark takes a different approach. The NRSV version that we just read says that "it becomes the greatest of all shrubs." While this might be a little more accurate to the reality, it's not actually what the Greek translates to. The word "lock anon" in Greek actually translates to vegetable. Or even more accurately – cabbage. Mark tells us that Jesus says that the kingdom of God is like a tiny mustard seed that when planted grows into a large cabbage.

Now, I really love the mystery genre. As a kid, I loved Nancy Drew and a series about Cam Jansen - a kid detective with a photographic memory. As I got a little older, I read Mary Higgins Clark, Agatha Christie, and Gillian Flynn. And of course, I am a huge fan of the silly and brilliant show *Only Murderers in the Building*. But I realized this week that the reason why I like this genre is because there are usually answers once you finish reading. The part that I enjoy about mysteries is working to figure them out. If there is a mystery that goes unsolved, it's quite an annoyance to me.

So, what Mark has presented us with is a mystery. But not an easy one to solve. There's no footnote to explain why Jesus says that the kingdom of God is a cabbage. There's not even a recipe for how to cook it. Nevertheless, it's what we are left to wrestle with today. But, I don't think it's a translation issue and I don't think it's a cultural issue. I think based on the last part of the scripture that no one understood what Jesus was talking about. The text tells us that he explained everything to his disciples in private. It doesn't tell us what he explained, but it does point to the fact that everyone hearing Jesus say these things were just as confused as we might be today. And – despite the annoyance to me, personally – I think that part of the reasoning for all these silly analogies and things that don't make sense to anyone reading or hearing it, is that it's supposed to be a mystery that remains a mystery.

The other story that we just read in Mark tells of a sower who throws seeds everywhere and they grow with no help or care from anyone. This is also a mystery. Of course, we know through science what plants need to survive and my backyard is a testament to the fact that

things can grow heartily without help. But why would Jesus compare the kingdom of God to my overgrown backyard?

To me, this parable is both good news and a warning for the church in our own time. The good news is that the gospel of Jesus Christ has its own inherent power. It doesn't require us to be highly skilled planters or constantly attentive farmers. According to this parable, all the gospel needs to grow is for us to scatter it out into the world. We don't even have to sow it carefully—we can just toss it out there as best we can. The mysterious power of the gospel will do the rest.

At the same time, this parable comes with a warning. We as the church often like to think that we know what we're doing as planters of the gospel. We value our technical expertise about how to plant the gospel in the world. We imagine that our church structures, Robert's Rules of Order, and our missional strategies are necessary to the spread of the gospel. As a result, we can spend so much time thinking about *how* to do church and make it grow that we forget to do the *only* step that actually matters. We forget to toss the seed out into the world—which is in fact, the only thing we're required to do.

Yesterday was a beautiful example of many churches in the area doing just that – tossing out seeds and seeing where God takes them. About 30 people from our congregation and numerous other churches around town marched in the pride parade. It was a beautiful experience seeing people who are often ostracized celebrated for the very thing that usually keeps them marginalized. There were many instances that felt like the kingdom of God was among us – there were people of all different walks of life, and there were people that disagreed with the message of pride. All of these people are God's beloved children. And I hope that our church's presence there let them know that there are spaces for them where they are accepted and loved for the children of God that they are.

We might not ever fully experience or understand the kingdom of God until God is ready for us to. But there are times that we can gain small glimpses of it. The youth had that experience this week as we heard about their mountain-top Montreat week. If you ask many of our youth what the kingdom of God looks like, some of them would probably say Montreat. I probably wouldn't say "a cabbage," but I could list some times and places that feel holy and set-apart, like the kingdom of God.

For all their mystery and obscurity, one thing is clear from the parables in Mark 4: Jesus tells us that God's reign is bigger, greater, and more mysterious than our wildest human notions. A seed explodes, its fruit matures, without the slightest cultivation. The smallest of seeds becomes the biggest of vegetables. Such images don't clarify; they shock and confuse. Those receiving this instruction remain comically stumped. The kingdom of God does not operate in accordance with received opinion and this world's principalities. At every point it upsets conventional wisdom, turns, and defies it again.

If only we will surrender ourselves to such a God. Divine mystery cannot be solved. Our responsibility is to proclaim and to hold onto it. Someone plants. Another waters. God alone gives growth. Immersing ourselves in the kingdom's mystery is an excellent way to celebrate the crucified and risen Lord that we are following. Amen.