

“Great Things in Small Packages.”

Have you ever wondered what the Kingdom of God looks like? There are probably a lot of ways to describe it, but our Gospel provides us with a fairly unique description, and I’d like to explore that for a few minutes this morning.

However, in order to do that, I first have to ask you a question: Have you ever had someone thank you for something you’d completely forgotten? You know what I mean. One day, a friend or an acquaintance, tells you about a chance remark or gesture that, at some point in the past, you had offered to them. And they tell you how it made a real difference in their lives.

Maybe it was when they had a family member in the hospital, or when they lost their job, or whatever; and you just happen to run into them, and said or did something. Whatever it was, you’d long forgotten, but they hadn’t. And, it turns out that your long-forgotten word or deed was precisely what they needed at that moment. And though you had forgotten the encounter, they treasured it in their hearts, and only just now got around to telling you about it.

If this kind of thing has happened to you – and it probably has – you might have felt a little embarrassed, that you couldn’t recall having said or done *anything* that was apparently so profound and which made such a difference. And there you stand, while this person is thanking you for changing their life, and all you can do is to nod, with a sort of vague expression on your face.

But, if this sort of thing *has* happened to you, you also know that it can be a very moving experience; it’s one that both humbles you, but also makes you feel good about yourself. In fact, you may find yourself wondering how something that seemed so very insignificant at the time, has grown into something so big.

I’ve been there, and I’ve wondered about that. But now that I’ve had some time to think about it, I realize that it’s

“like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs.”

But it's also

“as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day” – in other words, the sower did nothing else – “and [yet] the seed would sprout and grow, [and] he does not know how.”

Obviously, I'm quoting from our gospel which contained those two short parables. And though they're slightly different, they both make the same basic point with the image of a seed.

The one parable turns on the contrast between one farmer's relatively insignificant act of merely sowing seed, with the significance of the resulting harvest. The other parable turns on the contrast between a gigantic shrub, and the tiny seed that produced it. But both parables are teaching us that, in the Kingdom of God, more often comes out than we thought we put in.

And what's remarkable for me is the fact that this seed of the Kingdom, which produces far beyond our expectations, isn't so much the great, religious-looking deeds that people may do once or twice in their lives. The real seed of the Kingdom is the mustard seed: the tiniest words, the most inefficient pieces of witness, the little actions of every day life.

You could almost say that, from the point of view of the Kingdom, whatever you do sows a seed; and it's either a seed that benefits the kingdom, or which may even detract from the kingdom. Let me give you some examples of the former.

When you decide to greet a visitor in church,

or turn in a pledge card;

whenever you offer to pray with a friend,

or return the extra change the store clerk gave you by mistake;

whenever you speak up against a racist or a sexist joke,

or when you volunteer at a soup kitchen,

you're sowing seeds, both in your life and in someone else's life.

“Scatter seed upon the ground,” Jesus says in this morning’s Gospel, “and the earth produces of itself.” In other words, when we begin sowing even the tiniest of seeds, it begins a process over which we just don’t have much control. Oh, sure, we could step in and wreck the process by (if you will) over-watering the seed; or even help the process by putting down the right fertilizer. But, all in all, the growth does seem to happen all by itself. And that’s pretty amazing.

Of course, none of this will work if we don’t first step up. Seeds don’t sow themselves. The process has to begin somewhere, and with *someone*. But once you’ve got the ball rolling – once those seeds have been sown – you can pretty much just leave them alone; and let God take care of what happens next. And do you know what? The growth will happen at the right time, and at the right pace: “first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.”

And so, God invites us, in this morning’s Gospel, to learn how to let seeds grow – both in our lives, and in the lives of those around us – without trying to control the process. In fact, the Gospel may be also inviting us to live our lives without even fretting all that much about whether we are sowing *enough* seeds, or the right *kind* of seeds, or even sowing in the right *place*.

It was about ten years ago when I served my first term as Chaplain to the Episcopal junior-high summer camp back in Kansas. Part of my duties included planning and leading two worship services each day. And the homily I provided for the daily Eucharists, had to coordinate with, and support, the program that had been designed for that week.

Well, I would spend several hours each day preparing for the worship services – as well as tending to my other job as the designated pastoral care giver for over one hundred young people. And there were many times, during those worship services, when I would look out across a veritable sea of faces and wonder, “Am I actually getting through to them? Is *anything* I’m saying helpful?” (And, if you want to know a secret, I still have that anxiety from time to time.)

And these concerns would have completely done me in if, very early on, I hadn’t made the decision to allow my best efforts to be just that, my best efforts, and to allow God to worry about the rest. That would be my principal message to you this morning.

But there is one thing more that needs to be said. Our “best efforts,” when it comes to working in the field of the Kingdom of God, can take many forms and sizes and, like the mustard seed, it need not always be very big. Allow me to give you an example from my experience that one summer at the junior-high camp.

On the last night of the camp, there was a dance. Included among the campers was a young boy who was clearly either emotionally or mentally challenged. Although he was having a *great* time at camp, I knew that the dance might pose a problem for him, because just about the only people that I could imagine who would even be *willing* to dance with him – if he should choose to dance with anyone – would have been one of the adult staff members; and what junior-high-aged boy, regardless of who he is, would want to be seen dancing with a mother of three?

Well, one of the adult staff members, Deborah, came to this young man's rescue, and offered him a "mustard seed" in the form of a digital camera. "Take pictures of the kids dancing for me," she instructed him, and his face lit up, and he was off like a Mormon on a mission. He'd take a series of pictures, and then dash back to show Deborah his most recent efforts. "Wonderful," she'd exclaim, "take some more." And he did. And for that one boy, that evening was transformed from a potential disaster to an absolute delight.

In the end, it's good to know that, when we're tending the field in the Kingdom of God, that we've got the Creator of the Universe playing backup for us; and that we can, from time to time, relax a bit and let God do some of the heavy lifting. But this is not a *Get Out of Jail Free* card; we do have to be present, and we have to be ready and willing to sow those seed when the opportunity arises.

But I'm reassured – if not also humbled – to know that the community of faith will not rise or fall solely because of something I did, or failed to do. And when it is time to get to work sowing seeds, we can be assured that we won't always have to give everything we have, because sometimes only a single mustard seed – or even a digital camera – will be enough.

Amen.