

PROPER 6, June 16, 2024, Year B

- Here is a familiar experience: One day, something happens. Perhaps something *difficult* happens. Or worse - something *terrible* happens. We feel stress, experience fear, and have anxiety about what has occurred. We then struggle to adjust, and try to make sense of the challenge we are facing. In the process, we may find ourselves crying out, as one man does in the Gospels. "Lord, I believe. {But...} help my unbelief!"
- The kind of situation I have just described is about our struggle to have enough faith, or to have the *right kind* of faith. It's the kind of faith that Jesus sometimes compared to a mustard seed. We find that teaching in both **Matthew's** and in **Luke's** Gospels.¹
- **But today**, in *Mark's* Gospel, we hear a very *different kind* of mustard seed message.
- Instead of focussing upon the size or *amount of our faith*, Mark quotes Jesus as speaking *about something else*: it's about the **power** and **potential** of **God's Kingdom**. This has a different focus from *that other teaching, found in Matthew and in Luke*, about the size or amount of our own faithful acts of believing. **Instead, today's parable in Mark is first about God's Kingdom, and so, its not about our own faith or our power of believing.** We need to explore what this means.
- [With your worship bulletin this morning, you will find a copy a painting by Jim Janknegt, which I am using with his permission. Along with it, I have included a small 'baggy' containing one or two tiny mustard seeds. I invite you to look at them.]
- Starting with the painting, **what is it** that our artist has depicted with his picture? Right away, we can see that he portrays the **Kingdom mustard seed** parable in today's Gospel reading. To appreciate that, let's keep in mind how the Gospels include two kinds of mustard seed teaching. **One** is what

we hear today, Mark ~ about *the huge potential* of what **God** can do with *apparently* small bits of the Kingdom. The *other* teaching is about the *often unrealized potential* of what **we** might accomplish through our *personal believing*, especially given how personal faith can sometimes be *less than we want*.²

- *And so, there is a notable difference, between Jesus' Kingdom-potential parable, in Mark, and Jesus' other teaching in Matthew and Luke, that refers to the size or amount of our personal believing. To help us recognize this difference, consider what we see in Janknegt's painting. In the foreground we see things that we usually think of as being big ~ like large cities, their tall buildings and the businesses they house. Dwarfing them is a great tree, which may represent the 'Tree of Life.'* Like the small mustard seed, *the great tree that it becomes* represents **what the Spirit is doing with God's Kingdom, and with God's people.**
- Notice the **community** for which the great tree provides a *place of habitation* ~ a community characterized by *many birds*, including both a beautiful peacock and a spoonbill, an owl and a *descending dove*.³ In traditional mythology, *birds represent communication between* the realm of the **sky** and the realm of the **land**, or between the **heavenly** sphere and the **earth**. The Tree of Life provides a *context for this communication*, and for the Kingdom community that God's Spirit nurtures between the two realms of spheres.
- And so, the mustard seed parable that we hear today is clearly a **'kingdom-power'** parable. For it is about **the power of God's presence**. *Because something like* a tiny seed has the potential to become a *towering* expression of God's mission to the Creation. And so we need to continue to distinguish this *kingdom-power mustard seed* parable, from Jesus' *rather different* mustard-seed teaching about the *'amount-of-our-belief.'* This is

because God's *Kingdom power* is present among and within us, regardless of the *measure* of our believing. To be sure, many times, Jesus laments his disciples' '*little faith.*' And yet, he does **not** so much refer to the **Kingdom** in terms of its *size*, but rather in terms of its **power** and **potential**.

- Based on Jesus' comments elsewhere, we can come to think of our *belief* or *personal faith* as **our work**, as *our challenge*, and –if we are fortunate– as our *achievement*. This is why we need to recognize the contrast we have been exploring ~ a contrast between **Jesus' Kingdom parable** in Mark, and Jesus' other sayings about *personal belief as small as a mustard seed*, in Matthew and Luke. Our parable today is about **Kingdom potential!** It's about the *Kingdom potential of God's mission*, **instead of** being about the *size* of our belief, or **our own** potential to do great things.
- With your worship bulletin, I have *also* given you a tangible sign of what *today's Kingdom parable* is about. It's not about the *starting size* of **your** and **my personal** power of *believing*. Instead, a **single and tiny** mustard seed is a tangible sign of **God's great Kingdom power**. This is true *even if* –at first– we experience God's power among us as something *small or limited*. Since *the tiny seed represents God's Kingdom*, it reminds us that God's Spirit gives God's people the *context and the means* for new life. And God gives us *the kind of life* that sustains our faith community, and enhances our *true well-being*.
- This life is best expressed when we *celebrate together* a symbol of God's Kingdom in the Eucharist. In the Eucharist, we come together *actively* to celebrate God's work *within us, among us, and between us*. We *stretch out* our hands to *receive* a small but powerful symbol of God's presence, *here* for us to *touch and embrace, receive and eat*. Holy Spirit-given Faith involves taking into our embodied human being *the small 'seed'* of God's kingdom's work among us. Spirit-given *Faith* helps us see *this*: how our embodied

humanity *is taken up into, and expanded by, God's Kingdom presence and work.*

- *Here in our midst, we want God's presence to grow. And, our Spirit-nurtured community of Faith is a sheltering Tree of Life. Our community of Faith embodies and expresses God's Kingdom presence among us. Remember how Jesus speaks of the angels, who he describes as moving up and down between the realm of heaven and that of earth? With them, we participate in a Spirit-shaped ministry.⁴ We participate in the process of making present here on earth, the reality of what is **above**. Heaven comes down to us 'below,' within the reach of our yearning being. All it takes for this to be true in our experience, is for a tiny seed of God's Kingdom to be planted within our hearts and minds, to take root in our imagination, and be expressed through our acts of willing consent. This tiny seed is planted within us through the gift of our baptismal Faith.*
- Latent within Jesus' words and imagery is this truth ~ that **God is the planter** of the tiny seed, **not us**. And God is the nurturing gardener who sees to its intended and anticipated growth. In other words, the tiny seed of God's Kingdom power becomes a great Tree of Life in our midst **not through what we do**. God's Kingdom power grows through what **God does**. All it takes is for us to be open, and then hospitable, to God's nurturing work in our lives together.



Jim Janknegt, *World's Smallest Seed* (2003)

(image used with permission from the artist)

Mark 4:26-34

Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is 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, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Notes:

¹ See Matthew 17:20 and Luke 17:6

² For example, see the several passages where Jesus laments the way that his disciples are people of “little faith” (Matthew 6:30; 8:26, 14:31 and 16:8, in context).

³ Since Kingdom images represent the final or ‘eschatological’ goal of God’s mission to the now-fallen but being-redeemed Creation, we might notice that Janknegt’s image contains at least two ‘predatory’ birds, an owl as well as what appears to be a hawk. This may represent the ambiguity of our present age, when we do not yet experience the anticipated biblical image of lions lying down with lambs, etc.

⁴ Here I have in mind Jesus’ words to Nathaniel, in John 1:51.