

*The Rev. David "Chip" Robinson*

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.

— *Mark 4:26-34*



There's an old joke (in fact, it's so old I imagine you've heard it) about a man stranded on top of his house during a flood. He's prayed for help – but God seems silent. Finally, a man comes by in a boat and yells, "Get in. I'll take you to dry land."

"No," replies the man. "God will save me."

As the water levels begin to rise another boat passes. The would-be rescuer yells, "Get in. The water's rising too fast. You must leave now."

"No," replies the man. "God *promises* to save me."

The rain continues and the water is lapping at his feet as he sits atop his roof. A helicopter appears above and begins to lower a basket to rescue him. He waves off the rescuers, yelling, "Thank you, no! God will save me!"

At last, the waters cover his house, drowning him. When he arrives in heaven, he meets with God and complains, "God, I trusted you to save me and you didn't."

To which God replies, "I sent two boats and a helicopter. What more did you want?"

Too often, we expect God to save us, or do things for us, when we're not willing to put forth any effort. It's like praying to win the lottery, but never buying a ticket. We expect God to work miracles, but we don't feel the need to be part of the miracle-making process.

In today's Gospel, Jesus, speaking in parables, urges his disciples to be part of God's Realm-building process. He tells them that the Realm 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" (4:26-27).

Some commentators translate the “someone” in this passage as God. That is, it’s God who not only grows the seed that becomes God’s Realm, but plants and harvests it as well. The harvest is often seen as God’s final judgment upon the world. This kind of thinking has led to a popular “forsaking this world for the next” type of theology that makes us passive onlookers in God’s world – waiting for God to do it all without our help.

However, I find it more powerful to view *ourselves* as the “someone” doing the planting and the harvesting. Earlier in Mark, Jesus encourages us to let our lights shine forth, and not hide our glory under a bushel. Jesus calls us to be active participants in God’s Realm and not passive bystanders, waiting for God to fulfill all our needs.

We may do the planting and the harvesting, but in *this* understanding of things, it is *God* who does the growing. In this, we learn *patience*. We want to see the Realm of God revealed in the world *right now*. We want the world to be ordered according to God’s will, where the poor and outcast are welcomed, where wars are ended and God’s peace reigns. But, we are not there yet, and some days it seems we will never get there. Out of frustration we may find ourselves yelling at the seed, “Come on! Grow already!”

To trust that seed, however, requires not just our *planting* efforts, but our *faith*. We must believe – putting aside all doubt – that the seed will grow, even when we see no evidence of growth or feel trapped in a prolonged drought. We have to remember that nothing emerges fully grown. There must *always* be a beginning, and we, as God’s followers, work in partnership with God. We must plant the seeds, tend the garden and conduct the harvest when the seeds ripen. No effort, no matter how small, is wasted. Jesus tells us that even if our *faith* is as small as a mustard seed, we are valuable workers in the Realm-building process.

Actually, when you think about it, it’s puzzling that Jesus would use the mustard plant as a metaphor for the Realm of God. Why compare God’s kingdom to, of all things, a mustard plant? It was considered more of a *weed* than anything else. Thinking of a mustard plant doesn’t evoke images of overwhelming power and grandeur. Why not compare God’s Realm to something sturdier – like an oak or a cedar?

When we reflect on it, however, the mustard seed is a perfect metaphor. The plant that grows is scorned as a weed, just as God’s Realm is scorned by the powerful in the world. An oak or cedar is admired for its strength and beauty, but a mustard seed is seen as a nuisance, something to be cut down and thrown in the fire. But, just like God’s Realm, a weed is persistent. We can seek to *subvert* the Realm of God by glorifying the things of this world. We can seek to *ignore* the Realm of God, deny its power and its immediate but not-yet presence among us, *but the growth continues*. A weed grows constantly, invading the world, covering over those things of the world that seem so attractive and tempting, just like God’s Realm.

William Barclay warns us to not underestimate the power of a weed because a weed “can push its green head through an asphalt path. Nothing can stop [its] growth. It is so with the Kingdom...nothing in the end can stop the purposes of God”

*(The Gospel of Mark, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956, p. 106).*

This is where we put our faith – even if our faith is small – in that seed that grows wild in the world. This weed of God’s Realm makes its presence known especially in those times that we’d rather ignore God’s call in our world.

In these hard times we live in, occasionally you’ll find someone along the side of the road or a median strip at a stoplight carrying a sign, “Will work for food.” Such folk seem pretty desperate for work – and I have no doubt that many of them are. But what about us? Are we also desperate to be workers in the Realm-building process? God is calling us – daily – to take up our sign that reads, “Will work for God,” and be about the daily process of planting the seeds of God’s Realm not just here at Christ Church, but in the world. By planting, we trust that God will do the growing and we will be the beneficiaries of God’s harvest.