

Seeds and Students (13June21)  
Mark 4:26-34

These words from Jesus really seem to fit.

Jesus hardly could've managed to tell us a better set of parables if he'd known that we were gathering today for a worship service that includes blessing our graduating seniors and celebrating the conclusion of a school year.

The first parable is about unexpected growth, of a small seed sprouting with a single leaf, then stretching skyward, and becoming a whole plant with all new potential to do good things. We may see that in a general sense as our young people grow and change and develop. From looking at them at a small starting point—maybe as babies, when we met them at a baptism, or as they first arrived in our midst—there's no way to predict how they'll turn out or be able to say what passions and skills they'll develop, where their interests will lie, what they'll share that will also shape us.

If this is like our children and youth, we may not want to be quite so careless as the farmer in the parable—just sort of ignoring the seed and drifting off to sleep and going about other business. We may want to be invested and highly attentive. As a congregation, we celebrate our dedication to our young people, including the hiring this week of Cheyenne Larson to be our new Children and Family Ministries Director in an expanded role and the history of the Boundary Waters trip for high schoolers. In these and other ways, we may want to help foster growth, and just like some plants can be trained in a certain direction, we may want to train our young people in a preferred direction, guiding them. But even then, we can't be sure how it will turn out. We can't be sure they'll follow our advice or share our interests. Mystery remains while we wait.

Besides this general view of unexpected and unpredictable growth and development, we could certainly see it more specifically for students and for all of us in this strange, surprising past year. They had to adapt in a different environment, and we've all grown in ways we couldn't have imagined.

Since Jesus starts his parable by saying that this is about the kingdom of God, we might note that he's not just saying "here's a metaphor of the stages of human development" or "here's what it's like to grow older." And so to make sure God is still part of what we've been considering, maybe we recognize the faith and trust.

When a tomato seed is planted, it doesn't have to be convinced to grow tomatoes and not zucchini. Though the process may take a while, we trust it will naturally grow into what it is supposed to be and do what it's supposed to do. So perhaps the parable prompts us to trust that through whatever mysteries and adaptations, behind the scenes and even while we are distracted or sleeping, God is still working. The growth is happening. And we may trust, the very evidence of plants and of people growing a sign of the kingdom of God, present in our midst.

I appreciate in this little image that Jesus doesn't care even to mention watering and weeding and fertilizing, doesn't put up a fence to keep out the rabbits, doesn't worry about the risk of crop failure. This is a story of success. In this little image, growth in God's kingdom may be unpredictable, but it's also inevitable. You're God's project, and you're good at growing.

The second parable from Jesus tells of the mustard seed that grows into the biggest shrub and welcomes birds to its shade. Paired with the first parable, we might be apt to think of this as a story of success, that you've grown into what you should be and are now serving others.

At the MCC, we often have reason to celebrate that for our graduates, for our children as they grow. There is a lot of success in our midst. A lot of hard work and grand accomplishments through our students' school careers and in their vast extracurricular activities. We tend to have high-achieving young people who go on to impressive schools and who courageously pursue wild opportunities, transplanting them all over the world, taking them far from the nursery where they were raised. We can celebrate those successes and the difference they (or you) go on to make in the world.

But I want to pause to wonder whether that's the metaphor Jesus is actually using in this parable. He says the mustard seed starts small and grows into the greatest and offers welcome.

But I suspect there's something teasing in this image, that it's not quite at face value. The reading itself says these are kind of riddles and not clear explanations from Jesus. So I'm not sure, but I'd invite us to consider some possibilities for the riddle.

See, Jesus could've picked an image like a sequoia seed, also a tiny seed that grows into the largest of all *trees* and shapes its ecosystem while living for a very long time. Instead Jesus picks the greatest of shrubs. A shrub, even a great one, isn't exactly an image of grandeur.

Jesus also could've picked something that stood out. If it's about achievement, then it would have to be rare and special. But a mustard plant is really common in Palestine. It pops up all over the place.

And those birds nesting in it. It's nice as a vision of hospitality, and Jesus could be saying that the church is welcoming to all. Or it could be that you grow up into what you're supposed to be when you are in service to others.

But partly it still strikes me as curious; if I'm planting my garden, I'm a little nervous about birds hanging around it. I know there can be benefits where some might eat bugs that could harm my plants. But they might also be eating the very seeds I'm trying to plant, or pecking away at the things I'm trying to produce. I'm not sure I want even more birds nesting and hanging out in my garden.

This mustard shrub almost sounds like an invasive species in the field, taking up space and giving shelter to bad company.

You may prefer the simple face value that is about a godly celebration of our great graduates, for their successes. But I'll at least ask you to consider if the kingdom of God is not in being the biggest and the best and the most helpful, but might be with those of us who are common and haven't achieved as much as we want and don't manage to be the most productive or make the best fruits, and

who may keep undesirable company from time to time.

Maybe God is active and cultivating you even when you're a tiny mustard seed, and when you're growing where you're not supposed to be, and when you don't stand out, or when there's waiting and mystery and you don't even know what you're growing into. Through it all, Jesus says you're part of God's reign that is popping up everywhere you look.