

## **“The World is our Garden”**

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Mark 4:26-34

A few years ago my son was encouraging me to get myself a little more up to speed on the physical sciences than my mostly forgotten high school science education took me all those years ago. So I picked up a copy of Bill Bryson’s book, “A Short History of Nearly Everything.” Bryson is a journalist who realized, about 4 or 5 years before he wrote the book, that he didn’t have the faintest idea about so very many things: for example, “why the oceans were salty and why the Great Lakes weren’t;” or “what a proton was, or a protein, didn’t know a quark from a quasar.” He became gripped by a quiet urge to know a little about these matters and to understand how people figured them out – like “how does anybody know how much the earth weighs or how old its rocks are and what really is way down there at the center...?” – among many other things.

So Bryson decided to devote a portion of his life to “reading books and journals and finding saintly, patient experts prepared to answer a lot of outstandingly dumb questions.” “The idea,” he writes, “was to see if it isn’t possible to understand and appreciate – marvel at, enjoy even – the wonder and accomplishments of science at a level that isn’t too technical or demanding, but isn’t entirely superficial either.” I think he largely accomplishes this, and I’d recommend the book, particularly if you are scientifically challenged like I am.

It is a marvel to consider, for example, what scientists are saying these days about how the universe started (not *by whom* or *why*— theological questions). They are saying that it started as a very small thing, and that very small thing was there between 13 and 14 billion years ago as we think of time now. Before there was even time or space there was just this thing about the size of a marble – and in less than a trillionth of a trillionth of a second, God must have said, “Let there be ... ,” and that very small seed grew to a volume larger than all the observable space in the universe.

That’s what scientists are saying, and I can go with that – though it may not match up with how some might interpret the first and second chapters of Genesis, it is in keeping with how Jesus, in nearly all of his parables, talked about how God works – about how the kingdom of God is grown. So God took a very small thing, and with grace and power and great labor in the twinkling of God’s eye, a universe was born.

Our reading from Mark’s gospel this morning contains two very brief parables around a familiar theme - parables about growing and harvesting. In the first the farmer scatters seed on the ground and it grows up, produces fruit, and is harvested. He doesn’t have any control over, or even any understanding of, what happens after the seed is sown. He might as well just take a nap! The other is the parable of the mustard seed, among the smallest of seeds, yet when it is planted it grows larger than all the other plants, so that its branches become home to the birds of the air. Mark tells us that this was the customary way that Jesus taught – in

parables like this, and privately he explained everything to his disciples. But this wouldn't seem to need much explanation, at least not for those who have heard it more than once. God's power isn't always obvious. Sometimes it comes in a very tiny form. In fact, God seems mostly unimpressed with the big stuff. Worldly power and prestige, accomplishment and success as the world defines it – and all that it takes to get it – pales in comparison to how the kingdom of God is revealed. It is underwhelming.

When the gospel is declared in the world – through word or deed – it seems small and insignificant: what possible difference could my little contribution make – my fumbling witness to Christ, my little prayer on another's behalf, my hand extended in compassion because I have been moved by the love that moves me. It seems like nothing more than a small dark speck, about the size of mustard seed, in the palm of your hand – something you might look at for a moment and then brush away. And if it were just a human word or a human work, maybe it could be dispensed with, quickly forgotten, barely regarded. But when it is God's word, God's work in us, it becomes something we can't ignore anymore, and despite the many things in life that keep us so busy, the things that seem so important – it becomes something we can't dispense with. The seed of the gospel, the kingdom of God – its power produces the qualities of love and joy, of peace and patience, goodness and kindness – the qualities that we long for but that seem to elude us when we are so captured by the big stuff, the things in life that at first seem more important. We can't ignore it anymore: what's that big bush doing here?

We all know how the germ of an insight, or a small shift in attitude or perspective, one small, seemingly insignificant action can change the course of an individual life, an institution's life, a nation's life. Sharyl Peterson tells how, years ago, some reporters were interviewing Boris Yeltsin, the Russian leader who oversaw the dismantling of the Soviet Union, and asked him what gave him the courage to stand firm during the fall of communism in the Soviet bloc. Yeltsin thought about it for a moment, and then said that it was an ordinary guy, an electrician from Poland named *Lech Walesa*, who started the downfall of communism in his own country that had inspired him. Walesa was once interviewed by a group of reporters, one of whom asked what had inspired him in his struggles. He said it was the civil rights movement in the U.S. and the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Years before, when Dr. King was interviewed and asked what had inspired him in his work, he said it was the courage of one woman, an ordinary African American woman who worked as a seamstress, whose name was Rosa Parks, who was so dog-tired that she refused to give up her seat to a white man and move to the back of the bus.

Is it too much to say that the act of one ordinary, tiny, brave woman living in a small, ordinary town in the southern U.S. brought about the downfall of communism? Maybe, but it's amazing how a seed planted ultimately works.

I've always taken heart from the story of the great reformer Martin Luther who said, "After I preach my sermon on Sunday, when I return home, I drink my little glass of Wittenberg beer and I just let the gospel run its course." If there was

any power in the sermon he knew it wasn't based on his theological expertise, on his eloquence or abilities. He knew the power of the sermon would have no effect unless the Word of God got into a person's heart. Luther knew he couldn't do that. It was the Holy Spirit who did that.

There is power in the word of God. It's like the power in a little seed that grows wildly beyond proportion to the size of what is sown. It isn't some little inert thing. We can treat it that way – brush it aside, disregard it, get so caught up in our own power or the powers of the world that try to push and shove us from here to there, back and forth – and we end up battling them until we fall exhausted. Or we can cultivate the ability to hear, to have ears that hear. We can daily meditate on the Word of God as it comes to us through the words of the scriptures so that we can grow to recognize it in our lives.

This power, this presence – the working of God's way in the world – is the very heartbeat, the very pulse that defines who we are and how we'll live. As we allow its tiny seed to be planted in us, we find that at the right time, God's time, its power grows and blooms in us, so that not only we ourselves, but others find rest and nourishment in our branches. It isn't something we possess of ourselves. It's something that God brings, God's own self, God's presence and power and peace and love enacted in us, through our "innermost parts" as the psalmist says.

It's always amazing to me how these readings of these kingdom of God parables about seeds and growth always seem to come around in our lectionary about at seedtime. Marilyn Cornell, who is coordinating our gardening team, has

started a nice practice. As folks have signed up for garden space, she has given them, along with the plot design and their assigned space, a packet of flower seeds to throw in with their vegetables.

Every one of us is given “seed packets” – gifts, abilities, values – and ample opportunities to plant them. In everyone we touch we may be planting seeds. As we’ve seen again this past week, with the 88 year old man who walked into the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. and opened fire with the rifle he carried in with him, killing the guard who opened the door for him – a man known as a white supremacist – so filled with bigotry and hate that it twisted his life into an ugly, awful thing. You wonder when that seed was planted. You wonder if he loved anybody, or if anybody loved him. Seeds of hatred and bigotry, seeds of evil, are sown all the time in this world. They are as prolific as any weed. Without careful and prayerful attention to the word of God, its power and potential for God’s goodness and beauty and peace – well, we know how weeds can take over.

Brothers and sisters, the world is our garden. Our own little patch of it is a good place to start. Every day is a good day to be out there planting, weeding and watering – nurturing God’s word in us and those we touch – tending to our piece of God’s garden with prayer, cultivating it with devotion, caring for it with enacted justice and hope, that the world will ultimately know the harvest of God’s freedom and love.