

“Those who are planted in the House of the Lord
shall flourish in the courts of God.” AMEN!

I have to be honest with you,
I have a problem with today’s
lesson in Mark’s gospel.

You might remember last week
we went through Mark’s account of
Jesus telling his family and
the scribes from Jerusalem that
his true family are those
who do the will of God.

Those who follow Christ and go
to do the will of God
are siblings in Christ.

I don’t have much of a problem with that sermon!

That’s an easier to preach because
we are doers and like energy and activity.

But now today, we hear the
familiar seed parables and
the Spirit’s direction is quieter as
we enter into this sermon.

So when this happens... when I stare at

the cursor on my iPad screen standing idol,
I revert back to the theme of the gospel.

We talked about that last week, too.

The fact that the theme of the gospel is
spoken out of the mouth of Jesus in
his first words quoted in Mark when he said,

“The God-time is fulfilled and the
kingdom of God has come near;
repent and believe in the good news.”

When scripture lessons like today’s are
more nuanced and unclear it is good
to search out how it relates to
the theme of the book.

And what I found was intriguing.

That by going back to this theme,
two things rise up for us to compare.

The seeds in today’s reading and
the Kingdom of God.

In one hand there is something very,
very small and in the other

there's something too large to calculate,
describe or even fathom. (Pause)

A seed in one hand is ordinary, controllable,
limited and clear and Jesus uses
two seed parables to help his listeners
begin to understand the kingdom of God.

Which is something unclear, mysterious,
limitless and very unique.

I am reminded of being in elementary school
when the teacher set aside little Dixie cups,
soil and seeds for each child
to plant and take home?

I remember bringing that cup home and
being so impatient.

The teacher said it would take a while to sprout
but how long is a while?

Checking it every hour didn't help,
my will and excitement did not make
the plant grow.

It was only when I eventually
forgot about it and then, one day,
there it was.

A tiny green sprout with its little leaf
beginning to unfurl.

Was it the mysterious quality of the paper cup?
Was it the soil or water or sunlight?

It was all a mystery and a miracle.

“You put a seed into the dark ground and,
poof, like magic it turns into something else:
something green, thriving, perhaps
even spreading across the ground.”

Family of God, this sermon is hard to write
because Jesus talks of this random
scattering of seed and
“waking and sleeping and
the seed sprouts and grows,
but the scatterer does not
know how.”

How can you write a sermon when
you don't know how the seed grows?

I want to know how.

I want to have a formula for the growth
to know that what I do is imperative as

to whether or not that seed sprouts
and grows,

but that desire is not the point of these parables.

There was an action, a seed was planted
then there was a letting go.

The seed in my Dixie Cup grew
when I forgot about it.

And for a lot of us,
the letting go is very,
very difficult.

Yet, Jesus assures us that the earth
will produce of itself and the stalk
will come first, then the head and then
the full grain in the head.

A logical, step by step progression that
the seed will grow on its own, and of
its own accord and on its own timeline.

And we may not even get to see the
fruits of our labor because we do not
have control of the time. (Pause)

But I so want to know what to do!

And the lesson from Jesus makes it simple.

Plant a little something here and there
then go to sleep and wake up.

God will take care of the rest. (Pause)

So, the question then is
what do we plant? (Pause)

Most of you all know that we are
in the midst of a pretty big
renovation project at St. Stephen.

We have raised most of the funds in advance
of the work and we will be spending
a lot of money to repair the past mistakes
of the original construction workers.

There will also be updates to improve
our foundation level and install new flooring,
hang new lighting, fresh coats of paint
and the replacement of
windows and doors.

Some of us might be wondering
why spend so much money on a building
when the church is the people?

It is a good question and I have battled
with God in prayer about
doing the right thing.

Wondering if it was selfish to do these things
while many people struggle financially.

What I know is that the decisions made
by the Council and I, with thanks to
the generous financial gifts from
the people of St. Stephen and
in the formation and work of
the Building Design Team,

all of these were all like planting tiny seeds.

It wasn't easy, it took a lot of time and
a few more grey hairs and there's still a lot
to be done but by planting seeds like this

we outwardly recognized that God
is in control of what we are doing.

You see, planting these seeds is not passive.

It is an activity that grounds our hope in God
in trust and faith to get
through a difficult patch.

Not everyone will agree, and some may even
leave St. Stephen because large projects
like this one can bring the worst out of us
if we leave God out.

But, then I consider a conversation with
a long time member of the congregation
who for years, has been looking for
better employment because

she is qualified to be working in something
more appropriate than where she works now.

I don't think she'd mind if I shared what she
told me just the other day.

She said, "I've decided to not worry
about finding something else, but focus instead
on blooming where I am planted."

It is a statement of faith to my ears,
much like what Jesus mirrored in
the parable of the seeds.

It is taking this and planting it in
the ground with hope, trust, and faith
that something will grow. (Pause)

And the good news is, according to Jesus,
we don't need to know how.

Just know that it will. (Pause)

The seed metaphors keep coming in Mark
and Jesus speaks about a specific
kind of seed next, a mustard seed.

It is not tall or majestic like a cedar or an oak.

The kingdom of God is more like a thick shrub
but it is protection and safety for all
those land creatures.

The truth is...

“Few powerful nations like to compare themselves
to mustard bushes, but [would]
rather [give images of] impressive,
great cedar trees
[to bolster their image of strength].”

Jesus, does not have a problem in describing
the kingdom of God to be like a low and
expansive shrubbery. :-)

So this is where Mark's Jesus meets us.

A vision of growth and optimism and we are people who like these things.

We will gladly tag along with this message, but is that all there is?

No, because we are reminded that Mark wrote to a community of Jesus followers who were experiencing turmoil and chaos.

They lived under the thumb of Roman occupation and the temple in Jerusalem was just destroyed by their legions of soldiers.

The conflict and danger for the followers of Jesus was real.

Mark's seed story about growth and optimism clashed with their realities.

And when we are honest, we find it clashes with our world, too.

With the five year marking of the Pulse Night Club shootings yesterday and this week is the mark of 7 years since the Emanuel 9 tragedy.

How can the kingdom of God grow amidst

such chaos and tragedy?

We don't know how,
but it does.

It grows out of amazing forgiveness
unleashed upon the shooter from families
and from Mother Emanuel AME Church.

The flowers of testimony and humanity
from the seeds planted by the families of
those who lost loved ones to the violence
at the Orlando Night Club helped
to tell the story of real people

with real joy and real hope,
mercilessly cut-down while celebrating
identity and freedom.

In the cracked pavement somehow
the flower still grows because people like
you aren't afraid to plant seeds and then
leave it to God to bring growth and
to finally be healed.

AMEN!