

A SEEDY HOPE

Psalm 92:1-4, 12-15; Mark 4:26-34

I know there are a number of you within this congregation who really enjoy gardening. You're often outside weeding and raking, pruning and fertilizing, tending and watering, and overall enjoying the gift of time outside, time to focus on something you enjoy, and having the opportunity to watch something change slowly but perceptibly over time.

When my husband and I were married we were gifted a number of perennials to use as part of the decor in the reception hall, but also to then plant into our flowerbeds as a sort of "wedding garden"—a visual reminder as the flowers bloom each summer of our wedding day. Which sounds lovely, doesn't it? And it is. But wow, is there also a lot of pressure to try and keep all those flowers alive. Because what does it mean if they all start to die off or don't resurface each spring?

Earlier this spring I was scanning the flowerbeds and noted that at least 5 plants hadn't come up and I was certain we'd managed to lose them over the winter somehow. But, a couple weeks later, once I'd actually raked the leaves away, I noted small green shoots just starting to poke up through the soil. We hadn't lost those flowers after all. But the thing is, even for all my tending, or not tending, to those flowers, there's nothing I can do to make them grow—nothing any of us can do. We can tend and water and fertilize but in the end, we're not the ones who make them grow—the growth is automatic. And it's mysterious.

Jesus uses parables about seeds to try and help explain this mystery that is the kingdom of God, or God's reign or rule. We see these seed parables a lot in Mark, including the two parables we heard today, and also in the parable of the sower. There is mystery to God's reign, but these parables help us to view it with a different perspective. That's what parables do: force us to use our imaginations in order to adopt new ways of perceiving. So, why so much about seeds and sowing?

What we need to remember is that these parables weren't placed in the Bible for us alone, but were originally told to the disciples and the the crowds of people gathered near Jesus. The disciples were learning from Jesus, but they often didn't get it. They often didn't understand what Jesus was saying. So Jesus tried to make things more clear for them by offering these parables, and sometimes even explained the meaning behind the parables. And what we hear come up over and over is a message to the disciples to just sow. They have been given the seed and they are the ones who must sow it. It is God who will see to the seeds' growth. Though we don't know exactly how or where or when a seed will take root, we are told that it will grow gradually and automatically. It will grow perhaps so subtly that you won't even notice, until at last it produces its intended fruit. But none of that can happen without first sowing.

In our second parable we become more attuned to the seed itself. Jesus points out its smallness. The mustard seed is the smallest of all the seeds and yet, once it is sown it

becomes the greatest of all the shrubs. At first glance, we can acknowledge that this parable tells people something they probably already know about God's reign: that it may start out small but it can morph into something much larger; also, something small and insignificant can turn into something public and noticeable.

In reading this parable, it's helpful to know a thing or two about mustard plants: in the area where Jesus lived, mustard shrubs were all over and could spread quickly and easily—automatically, even—without needing the help of humans. And yet, Jesus tells us, this is what the kingdom of God is like: dense, scruffy, easy-to-grow mustard shrubs. Can you imagine hearing Jesus speak to us today and say that God's reign is like dandelion fluff? It is small and floats where the wind takes it, but when it grows it produces great fields of yellow? Or that the kingdom of God is like a front lawn filled with thistles? We would probably laugh. Dandelions and thistles aren't plants we usually try to cultivate in our yards and parks and gardens. They are weeds that we pluck out of the ground, hopefully before they go to seed. So we can imagine that Jesus speaking of the greatness of mustard plants was humorous for his listeners. And this humour helped them to imagine more.

Now, mustard plants have some good features: they are good for medicinal purposes, and make for a great condiment. But a field of mustard shrubs isn't exactly a cash crop. Nor are they like the cedars of Lebanon, which are mentioned many times throughout the Bible, including today's Psalm, and are known for being tall, sturdy, and noble with large, wide branches where birds and animals can make their homes—a place where the nations can flourish. Those who love God and want to be in relationship with God, and who reflect that loving relationship out toward their neighbours, their growth is compared to the great cedar of Lebanon—producing fruit for many years, always green and full of sap, even as they age. The cedars of Lebanon make for a beautiful metaphor in many ways. So why would Jesus compare God's reign to, essentially, a weed? Why not cedars?

Once again, the parable forces us to use our imaginations. Jesus certainly could have compared God's reign to a great cedar, but instead he compared it to shrubs. Jesus is making us consider God's reign from a new perspective. When seeds are sown, what grows may surprise us; and we need to be open to using our imaginations, to seeing from new perspectives, so that we might gain new understandings of God's love in this world. Jesus isn't talking about the relative worth of shrubberies, but inviting in a new way of perceiving greatness. Mustard shrubs may not be the biggest or most noble of all plants, but they still contain greatness. Something ordinary can still, inch by inch, transform a space into a welcoming place for those, like the birds, who need a home. Something ordinary can still have the ability to provide sanctuary, hospitality, and sustenance—just like the mysterious Kingdom of God. The parable takes greatness and flips it so that our hope might be ground and rooted in the small things, in the ordinary beginnings which, over time, can effect great change. That kind of hope is imperative and can get you through a difficult stretch.

So, it seems we are to sow. To sow and use our imaginations. To sow and be open to new perspectives. To sow and to let go, trusting that God will enter and cause the growth and transformation of hearts.

But, wow, that's not an easy task. Are we really expected to plant seeds and then just leave it all to God, trusting that God will move things along on God's timeline? How can we know that God is truly transforming hearts? How can we say that small beginnings can lead to great things when they seem to move so painfully slowly? If we're seeking justice for something that we know is good, why isn't the Kingdom of God like a winning race horse or a swiftly moving current? How long do we have to wait? How can we accept that greatness can come from ordinary things when our ordinary everyday attempts at justice seem thwarted at every turn? At times it seems that our current context might preclude any kind of automatic hope.

In fact, we've felt this acutely in our own denomination: the Presbyterian Church in Canada. For years, many in our church have planted seeds by courageously and boldly speaking with a prophetic voice about the full inclusion and affirmation within our church of LGBTQI individuals. Many have been doing this since at least the early 90s. For years now, both LGBTQI individuals and others in the church—lay people and elders and clergy—have expressed an interpretation of scripture that opens doors, that welcomes all, that makes clear Christ's love for the marginalized, the vulnerable, the lonely, the hated, the ignored. For so many years LGBTQI individuals have experienced harm and have been made to feel small, unloved, and sinful at the hands of others who hold greater power in the Presbyterian Church. And all for just being who they were created to be. For at least 30 years now, our LGBTQI siblings and those who advocate alongside them have asked "how long?" How long until the seeds that we've sown take root and loving, affirming, inclusive changes blossom and flourish? How long until our greater church comes to accept that God's kingdom invites and includes everyone, no matter their sexual or gender identity.

During General Assembly this past week, a listening report from the Rainbow Communion was presented. This report was made based on interviews with over 100 people from across Canada who shared stories of harm done within the church to LGBTQI individuals, and to their allies, as well as grace received in the face of challenge. The report shares the voices of those who experienced and were witness to a great deal of hurt and harm. Many of their stories were difficult to absorb.

What within Mark's seedy hope of an automatic kingdom of God can survive the testimonies of harm done to LGBTQI individuals and their advocates and families?

And then Tuesday happened. On Tuesday the commissioners at the 2021 General Assembly voted to approve two remits that, after a number of years of consideration at all levels of the church, would more securely root hope in those seeds planted years ago. The Presbyterian Church in Canada now holds a definition of marriage that includes two adults, no matter their sex, and now upholds that those who identify as LGBTQI may be ordained as ministers and elders in the church.

It's a big step. It's not a perfect step, as churches and ministers are allowed "liberty of conscience," which means that they can continue to hold an opposing view of marriage and ordination. This means there is still work to be done to make our church across Canada more affirming and a safer place for all to come and worship.

So, we keep hope in those seeds that have yet to produce fruit, but acknowledge the ordinary things that got us to where we are today. We, as a church, didn't always feel ready for inclusion. But the Spirit moved in and broke down walls and boundaries and changed hearts over time. It didn't happen suddenly, but in small and unassuming ways: through conversations, through studies, through the voice of a friend or loved one when they came out, through stories, through grace, through hearts slowly transformed by God's automatic and hope-filled reign.

Our need for inclusion is not over. We cannot hide from the harm that we know has been done. There is still much to do in terms of healing, reconciliation, recognizing brokenness and journeying to wholeness both alongside those to whom the harm was done, and as a community of Christ followers.

In our world where many injustices are present and it feels like, for all our shouting or calls for justice, nothing happens, Jesus presents a kingdom that, while different from our expectations, points us to hope and grace and the chance to let go of our preconceived notions and imagine something new. He presents us with spiritual growth and intimacy with God that arises as naturally as seeds growing. The harvest will come without us having to focus our attention beyond sowing the seeds, because God adores us and it is this love that is the power of growth. It is this love that transforms the tiniest seed into an abundant shrub that gives rest and shade to the singing birds, just as it transforms our tiny, distorted awareness of God from something ordinary to something extraordinary in which we ourselves and all those we meet can rest.

Everyday we have the opportunity to sow seeds: seeds of love, of compassion, of repentance, of reconciliation, of relationship, of healing, of grace. We do this by being Jesus' hands, feet, and heart in this world. We do this because God will not fail to fulfill the promise of salvation. Though mysterious, God's reign is here and now, and it is tomorrow. And we have the sometimes painful, oftentimes joyful experience of noticing it grow and produce fruit in many hearts. Amen.