

Little Things Adding Up to Big Things

Mark 4:26-34 – Proper 6B

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It seems to me that the days of our lives are made up of lots of little things. A phone call, a text message, an errand to run, a meeting to attend, a check of the rain gauge, a quick prayer before going to the doctor, a repair project, another check of the rain gauge, tucking the kids into bed at night. Lots and lots of little things. What do they add up to anyway? Maybe more than we know.

Brenda and I once lived in a parsonage that was next door to a vacant lot. We used the space to plant a garden. First, we planted all the good stuff: green beans, peas, onions, potatoes, carrots, cucumbers, beets, tomatoes, sweet corn. We had plenty of room left over, so I put in four or five hills of zucchini. Then, since I had extra seeds, I put in four or five more, you know, just in case one or two didn't come up. Two months later—I don't think I'm exaggerating—we had zucchini growing everywhere, out of the garden, across the lawn, and almost into our kitchen.

Now, there are only so many zucchini casseroles that a guy can eat. So I took matters into my own hands. I got a big refrigerator box from the local appliance store. I cut it off at 5 feet and filled it to overflowing with zucchini. I put an ad in the church bulletin and included it in the Sunday announcements: *Free zucchini! All the zucchini you can haul away! Bring a friend and a pick-up truck!* The title of my sermon may have also helped, *"Would Anyone Like Some Zucchini?"* Would you believe, by Sunday afternoon we had so many people stopping by the parsonage that we almost had to call the cops to direct the traffic. By Sunday evening, the refrigerator box was empty and our zucchini was scattered all over town. All of this from a few hills of zucchini. Again, lots and lots of little things. What do they add up to anyway? Maybe more than we know.

Jesus tells three parables in Mark 4. Each has to do with seeds. Just a reminder, Jesus's parables depict scenes from everyday life, but often with a twist or a surprise. The seed parables have a close-to-home ring to them, especially in the hills of Galilee and hopefully in a farming community like Wells. They tell us that God's kingdom is near and even breaking into the ordinary world in which we live.

During his three years of public ministry, Jesus was a sower of seeds—little seeds. He didn't live or serve or teach on a grand scale. No, he was a little man in a little country with a handful of disciples. And yet, because he did everything with a sense

of purpose and great love, he had an amazing impact upon the people around him. And little by little God's kingdom sprang to life and began to grow.

Why was it important for the writer of Mark to put these three parables toward the beginning of Jesus' ministry? Maybe because this gospel was written around 70 A.D. The Jewish-Roman war was exploding. The Romans marched into Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and left the city in ruins. People were afraid. The early Christians, along with everybody else, felt vulnerable and helpless. They not only feared for their lives. They feared that their newfound faith in Jesus was in danger of collapse.

So, Mark shares a few of Jesus' seed parables. As compared to the pomp and puffed-up power of the Romans, stories about seeds help listeners look for God's presence in small and often hidden places. Mark starts with the parable of the sower and the seed. We didn't read it today, but you've likely heard it before. The sower is lavish in spreading the seed. Not all of it falls on rich soil, but much of it does. And it yields thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.

In today's passage, Mark uses Jesus' parable of the growing seed to encourage those who are guiding the endangered church. Seeds are small and vulnerable, suggests the parable, but they grow mysteriously and miraculously, without our effort and often without our control.

I heard of an elementary school science project. A young boy planted several seeds and was supposed to monitor how quickly they grew. There was a problem, though. Seeds don't grow particularly well when little hands dig them up every few days to see how they're doing. The parable of the growing seed encourages us to be patient, to wait as the seed does what seeds do.

Next comes the parable of the mustard seed. This takes a different turn. The mustard seed was often characterized as the smallest of seeds. What's surprising is that this smallest of seeds grows into an extravagant bush, large enough for birds to come and make their nests. The contrast is between a humble beginning and a remarkable ending. Life in God's kingdom can be like that. Jesus' efforts might seem small and insignificant. But just wait, Jesus promises. The mustard seed is tiny, but once it's planted it will produce a glorious shrub.

I wonder if Jesus' stories about seeds have things to tell us about interim time here at Good Shepherd. This is God's church, after all. God is the one who planted it. And God is the one who gives the growth. Much as we might get anxious, you and I

can't accomplish anything worth a hill of zucchini without the help and strength of God's Spirit.

Another thing we can say about seeds is that amazing growth often happens during challenging times. I hesitate to say it but change and adversity are inevitable in a church. While we don't go looking for these things, perhaps they can do us some good. That's because, *during times of challenge, our roots are forced to grow deeper.*

Suddenly church leaders need to relate to each other more intentionally. Thus, we're having a council retreat next Sunday. Parishioners step forward to help because they are needed in ways they maybe weren't needed before. People's prayers take on a sense of urgency. The key during times of transition and change is for people to communicate as openly as possible, and to treat each other with kindness. When this happens, the roots really do have a chance to grow deeper.

Yet another thing we can say about seeds is that – with God giving the growth and the roots going deeper – *there will be inevitable surprises that come.* God has a plan for this congregation. It's not always easy to see it, but I believe there is one. Out of the tiniest of seeds will come the greatest of shrubs. And you may be surprised at what you – and God – can accomplish together.

No doubt, when a pastor leaves a congregation, it's normal for congregants to feel a bit lost. The footing seems less secure than before. A story from a former pastoral colleague, Mary Pechauer, provides an image for how Good Shepherd might get through such a time as this. The story happened a few years back. Mary was at home with her youngest child, Mikkel. They were at the living room window at 4:00 in the afternoon, waiting for the three older kids to come home on the school bus.

It was raining outside. The sidewalk in front of the house was starting to get icy. Siri, age 10, got off the bus, and promptly slipped and fell. She picked herself up and continued down the sidewalk. Soon afterward Jens, who was 7, also tumbled to the ground. That's when Mary got worried. You see, little Liv, who was 6 at the time, has cerebral palsy. She runs and jumps with the best of them, but the one thing she cannot do is catch herself when she falls.

As Mary rushed to the door, she took one more look at the kids. Siri and Jens were standing next to Liv. Liv must have sensed danger because she came to an immediate stop. The three of them were assessing the situation. Before long they had a plan. Jens helped Liv take off her backpack. He got down on his hands and

knees and began to crawl across the sidewalk. He looked back and motioned for Siri to do the same. Then they both motioned for Liv to follow. Jens was in the lead and Siri was right beside little Liv to help her along the way. Ever so slowly, the three of them shuffled along the sidewalk, crawling safely home.

I see this as an important picture of a pastoral transition. A pastor leaves. The footing feels less secure than before. Good Shepherd will need a few folks out front in leadership. But more than anything, Good Shepherd will need many folks going side by side, making sure that nobody falls, helping each other along the way.

Friends, during this time of transition, I have a challenge for you: go out and do something small. Plant a seed or two. Say a prayer or two—especially for the church council and the ministry teams and the staff. Check on a neighbor. Say hello to a child. Introduce yourself to somebody you don't know very well. Call someone you haven't seen in a while. Don't insist on getting your way. Be kind to each other. Pass on faith to your children and grandchildren. And by all means, when you're doing these little things, do them like Jesus did, with a sense of purpose and great love.

Lots and lots of little things – that's what we're talking about when planting seeds. What will they add up to anyway? Maybe more than you know. After all, you are God's church. God is the one who gives the growth. And along the way – I'm just sure of it – you will be in for some incredible surprises.

You know, we 21st century types want our lives to be full of successes and significance. Jesus calls us to have time and patience for hiddenness and insignificance. After all, these little things often point beyond themselves toward the reality of the kingdom of God that is already here and now. Amen.