

“Seeds & Branches”

Mark 4:30-32

June 14, 2009

The image of seeds is used frequently in scripture. It is good stuff for us in farm country - seeds are going in everywhere - farmers in the fields - gardeners down on their knees planting another garden. Seeds and sowers are everywhere and all are hoping that what is buried in the dirt will spring to life and produce something big. I suppose that it is not just the Bible that uses images of seeds and sowing Everywhere inside the church and outside folks are busy planting ideas with the hope that their particular product or teaching will catch on and grow. Seeds and sowing and dirt and growth can be used to talk about a lot of things - often the images help us to understand what a person wants to say.

James A. Garfield, prior to serving as President of the United States, was president of Hiram College in Ohio. One day a father asked Garfield if there were a short-cut whereby his son could get through college in less than the usual four years. He wanted his Son to get on with making money. The college president gave this reply, “Of course there is a way; it all depends on what you want your boy to do. When God wants to grow an oak tree, he takes 100 years. When he wants to make a squash, he only takes two months.” Somehow in the images of seeds and sowing it is easier to get the picture.

In the beginning of the 4th chapter of Mark [from which our Gospel text comes this Sunday] we have the parable of the sower in which we have a farmer going out into the field with a bag of seed, scattering it around and letting it be. The seed takes root Or it doesn't. In part it is dependant on the soil and whether or not it is receptive and fertile soil into which the seed falls. Mostly, it is clear that we can not fully control what happens to the seed once we have scattered it. The growth and production of the seed is left to God. But the parable comes to us to remind us that what is important is that the seed gets scattered. We get the picture.

It is familiar imagery. We talk about how important it is for us to just get out there and scatter the seed of the Gospel - or how important it is that we be ready to receive the seed and let it grow in our lives. But today we have a very unique seed parable that is a little harder to really figure out. It is a cute little parable about a mustard seed. It is an image that we love because we can imagine that from tiny beginnings great things can grow. And, I suspect that that really is the point of the parable as Jesus told it. Still, as I ponder the parable in detail it is very interesting. Mustard seed. I know that there are farmers that raise mustard. But mostly we try to keep it out of our fields. Mustard seed - interesting stuff. Said to be the smallest of seed [though it is not]. And then it is said to grow into the greatest of all shrubs - and I wonder by what gauge any mustard bush could be judged to be the greatest.

Interesting stuff. Fields of mustard are beautiful in bloom ... And I love a little mustard as a condiment with a variety of foods. It makes a great concoction for curing what ails you if you are into ‘mustard plasters’ like my father was. But mostly, what we think of as mustard is a weed that we spray and try to control every year. And that was

the case in Israel as well. This 'greatest of all shrubs' that Jesus makes reference to in the Gospel text was most likely what is known as 'black mustard. It could grow as large as 6 feet. One article that I read said that "no self-respecting farmer would let it grow in their fields. Once it is established, it is extremely difficult to root out." It is really an interesting plant to choose to compare to the Kingdom of God. One author spoke of it saying that it would be like using dandelions for the image - pretty yellow flowers but ultimately we think of it as a weed that we would never deliberately seed in our yards and though we try to get rid of it, once rooted it is pretty hard to get rid of.

So the Kingdom of God is like the mustard seed - maybe Jesus didn't have access to information about better examples. If He wanted something impressive He could have talked about California's giant sequoia trees. The Guinness Book of World Records records the seed weighing only 1/6000th of an ounce. Yet the tree, like the one known as 'General Sherman' growing to a height of 275 feet and weighing in at an estimated weight of 2756 tons [girth = 102.6 feet and age = 2200 years old]. Now that is impressive growth. But Jesus talks about a mustard seed and a shrub that many consider to be little more than a weed.

Interesting But kind of hard to understand. What is Jesus trying to tell us? What is the picture that Jesus wants us to see? What is the kingdom of God like? Certainly I would like it to come across as a lot more impressive and powerful than a mustard seed that grows into a plant that many would like to root out of the field. Perhaps it is important at this point to draw a distinction between the 'Kingdom of Heaven' which scripture often refers to and the 'Kingdom of God' which is referred to here. This Kingdom of God of which Jesus speaks is where the Gospel is proclaimed and the seed of faith takes root so that growth happens. I suspect that as Jesus uses this image He is thinking about any place that faith takes root - perhaps in an individual heart and life - perhaps in the church as faith calls God's people together.

How is it that we understand ourselves as the people of God where God is at work in our lives? I think of the mustard seed and begin to really like the image in a new way. First, who we are as the people of God that are seeking to live under the rulership of God first, we are a people upon whom a tiny seed of faith has landed ... somehow it has been deliberately scattered in our direction and even though we do not know how it has taken root and begun to grow. And as it grows it begins to spread out its branches - perhaps as individuals - perhaps that shrub is seen most evidently as individuals of faith come together to form the church. Not everyone thinks very much of that plant - some would like to get rid of the church all together ... others just don't see it as very valuable but it is hard to root out. It just keeps growing and stretching out its branches. In the whole scheme of things in the world, it may not appear to be the most impressive shrub in the world but there something amazing begins to happen. The branches reach out and they begin to provide shelter for those flying by. And in that shelter a home is created.

What is the kingdom of God like? Someone has said: "It is all around you and in you. We don't use the tiny mustard seed as an image of strength but as a sign of faith -- faith that God can use the smallest and frailest, the slowest, and the weakest to help bring in the kingdom." The Kingdom is a place where faith takes root and growth send out branches in such a way that shelter is provided. What could be greater? Tiny seeds of faith are planted in you ... in us. Let God grow the seed and let the branches reach out to provide shelter.

AMEN