

The tiny little mustard seed. This parable is likely familiar to many of you. The parable of the mustard seed appears in all four of the Gospels with some minor differences. In every account, the kingdom of God is compared to the tiny mustard seed. The seed is described as the smallest seed on the planet which then grows into an enormous tree that is big enough to give shade and rest to the birds. But did you hear what came right before our mustard seed parable? There's another parable about seeds. This parable is so simple and really, pretty boring, it is easy to miss. Maybe that's why the gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John don't include it. It just wasn't exciting enough to make the final draft. So why did Mark choose to include it?

"The kingdom of God is as if a sower would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, one does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once the sower goes in with their sickle, because the harvest has come." Yawn! Right? Seeds get planted and they grow. Big deal. Doesn't sound like very exciting kingdom to me. [pause] But maybe that's the point.

So if this parable is such a snooze-fest, why did Jesus say it, and why did Mark decide to write it down? What is the lesson here? Is it to emphasize that everything is not dependent on us? Is Jesus urging us to have the patience of a farmer? Is this a parable about God's grace, or maybe about the growing impatience of the first generation of Jesus' followers? Or maybe it's about the vitality of the planted seed, or the mystery and surprise of God?

The more I thought about this parable this week, the more it unsettled me. As much as I have grown in and deepened my faith over the years, I often struggle with the idea of trusting God to do the growing of God's kin-dom. I had to wrestle with this parable seemingly telling me to just chill out and everything will be ok. Really God? Have you looked around lately? Have you picked up a newspaper or turned on the radio or television? Some days it feels like the little seeds of God's shalom are being eaten by grackles before they even have a chance to take root.

But then I noticed something. The seeds don't plant themselves. The sower scatters the seed and then once the seed has become mature, the sower harvests the crop. The in-between stuff is the work of God. I was reminded of this classic children's story of Frog and Toad and the Garden:

Frog was in his garden. Toad came walking by. "What a fine garden you have, Frog," he said. "Yes," said Frog. "It is very nice, but it was hard work." "I wish I had a garden," said Toad. "Here are some flower seeds. Plant them in the ground," said Frog,

“and soon you will have a garden.” “How soon?” asked Toad. “Quite soon,” said Frog. Toad ran home. He planted the flower seeds. “Now seeds,” said Toad, “start growing.” Toad walked up and down a few times. The seeds did not start to grow. Toad put his head close to the ground and said loudly, “Now seeds, start growing!” Toad looked at the ground again. The seeds did not start to grow. Toad put his head very close to the ground and shouted, “NOW SEEDS, START GROWING!” Frog came running up the path. “What is all this noise?” he asked. “My seeds will not grow,” said Toad. “You are shouting too much,” said Frog. “These poor seeds are afraid to grow.” “My seeds are afraid to grow?” asked Toad. “Of course,” said Frog. “Leave them alone for a few days. Let the sun shine on them, let the rain fall on them. Soon your seeds will start to grow.” That night Toad looked out of his window. “Drat!” said Toad. “My seeds have not started to grow. They must be afraid of the dark.” Toad went out to his garden with some candles. “I will read the seeds a story,” said Toad. “Then they will not be afraid.” Toad read a long story to his seeds. All the next day Toad sang songs to his seeds. And all the next day Toad read poems to his seeds. And all the next day Toad played music for his seeds. Toad looked at the ground. The seeds still did not start to grow. “What shall I do?” cried Toad. “These must be the most frightened seeds in the whole world!” Then Toad felt very tired, and he fell asleep. “Toad, Toad, wake up,” said Frog. “Look at your garden!” Toad looked at his garden. Little green plants were coming up out of the ground. “At last,” shouted Toad, “my seeds have stopped being afraid to grow!” “And now you will have a nice garden too,” said Frog. “Yes,” said Toad, “but you were right, Frog. It was very hard work.”

Toad spent a lot of time and energy doing things that he thought were helping, but in reality, nothing he did made the seeds grow any faster. But he did plant the seeds. The sower scatters the seed and then once the seed has become mature, the sower harvests the crop. The in-between stuff is the work of God. How the in-between stuff works is a much bigger mystery when it comes to God’s kingdom that for how seeds grow, especially in our post-enlightenment, highly scientific world. But how the spirit of God works within us and through us, will always be a mystery. But the promise of this parable is that the seeds are growing. Deep beneath the surface of what we can see, the seeds of God’s love and justice that we plant are taking root and sprouting even if we can’t see the progress being made deep in the dirt. But we must continue to plant the seeds even if we don’t know how they will grow.

Like many of you, the horrifying situation at our borders has been at the front of my mind this week as the news continues to unfold of the thousands of children who have been forcibly separated from their parents who are seeking asylum in this county. Housing unaccompanied minors is not a new practice. Children and teens who crossed the border without their parents have been put in facilities resembling dog pounds for

years and it was as abhorrent then as it is now. But this practice of separating children and teens from their parents and treating the cases as criminal cases instead of civil cases is new and it is resulting in a drastic increase of minors being placed in the custody of the US government. As if this practice alone wasn't despicable enough, the administration had the gall to use scripture to justify their actions. The verse of scripture quoted by the Attorney General, that people must obey governing authorities because all governing authorities are ordained by God, has been used in the past to justify obeying the British government during the revolutionary war, to justify slavery, and to compel people to obey Hitler. I won't go into a bible study of Paul's letter to the Romans, but this is not the type of situation Paul was describing. The use of this text to justify the inhumane treatment of children and parents ignores the overall message of the bible – that God stands with the oppressed and persecuted, praises those who break the law for the sake of justice, and that we are called upon to love one another treat other with kindness and mercy.

So in this time, I am considering what seeds we should be planting. I think about my tiny contribution and wonder if it matters. My one phone call, my small donation to Together Rising, this one sermon. These feel like tiny mustard seeds that couldn't possibly change a thing. But then I am reminded that it isn't all up to me. I have no idea how God might be working in the mix and how my tiny seeds might sprout and grow and give peace to those who seek shade in the branches that have sprouted from the earth. We must not give up hope that God's kin-dom is taking root in the places where we plant the seeds. There is a dynamic and vital power at work that is beyond our comprehension and challenges our imagination. Like the sower, we may not understand or fully appreciate what is happening beyond our perception. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't keep planting and sowing the seeds of love and justice. It might be that we are looking for God's kin-dom to show up with the power and majesty of a redwood tree when in actuality, it shows up like a shrub. The largest of shrubs, yes, but a shrub nonetheless - a plant that is often treated like a weed because it spreads relentlessly. And yet it provides rest and safety and care for the birds. God is at work my friends. We just have to plant the seed.