

1 Samuel 15: 34-16: 13 (Psalm 20); 2 Corinthians 5: 6-10, 14-17; Mark 4:26-34

What we've come to call "the Parable of the Mustard Seed" may be one of Jesus' most famous parables. We hear it in today's gospel, and we hear a version of it in Luke's gospel as well, where the disciples are essentially told that if they have faith the size of a mustard seed, they can move mountains. So, clearly, we're meant to see that good can come from small things, and that God can make use of anything, especially our gifts and talents, no matter how small, as long as we have faith in them.

And yet, that can be one of the most challenging parts at all: the having faith in these small things to grow. We often may not feel like the things we're doing and saying are of value, or are having any sort of impact on those around us. And yet we don't always know what comes of the seeds we're planting. We don't know the work that God does to bring them to fruition, as we heard in the beginning of the gospel passage. We don't always get to see the results, or the fruits of our labour. Sometimes what's being planted may not grow until long after we've moved on, in some way or another.

Even if we have tonnes of knowledge about gardening and biology, even if we know the proper conditions to make a seed grow, we don't really know how to make it grow. It grows because of something bigger than us, something over which we have little control. We can give a seed all the right things, special dirt, the right amount of water, enough sunshine, and still it may not grow – trust me, I know, as I'm in the middle of trying to sprout peas and beans for Noah and me to grow this summer, some of which grew and some of which didn't, despite having all the same conditions. We get so caught up in doing things the "right" way, and then are disappointed when they may not work out in the way we had hoped. And yet that's sometimes a reality of living in this imperfect world in which we find ourselves, and we may not always know why.

So why is it that we expect the metaphorical seeds we plant, the seeds of faith, to grow fully and perfectly every time? In many ways, planting spiritual seeds is no different than planting physical ones. And yet I hear lots of people questioning, on a regular basis, why the people they encouraged to come to church – most often children or grandchildren – don't come to church. It's a reasonable question, and can be especially hard for parents or grandparents who may have spent years instilling the value of church and faith into the children and grandchildren, only to see them decide to stop attending when they're old enough. People often wonder what they did "wrong" for this to happen. They may wonder if they should have done more, or less, or done things differently. Maybe you tried inviting a friend to coffee to talk about faith, and they shut you down, or you had a great conversation with them, but then they showed no interest in attending church afterward. I know I've had a hard time when we've baptized babies here, and then don't get to see them or their lovely families again very often. But, the thing is, we can't blame ourselves in that. And we can't blame the people we're trying to support in their journey, either! For whatever reason, a reason often outside of anyone's control, really, that seed just wasn't meant to grow, at least not yet. We all know that God's time tends to be different – often much slower – than our own time, so maybe that seed will be able to flourish years down the road. Or, maybe like my dozen or so seeds I planted a few weeks back, maybe only some of

them will grow, and others never will. Maybe we need to keep sowing seeds, lots of seeds, in many places, in order for some to grow.

I think it's also worth considering, is what The Church – and I use a capital T and capital C there to emphasize the wider church, not our particular community – but is what The Church has to offer the “right” materials for growing the seeds of spirituality in the people of today? I was shocked to find out that, for the best chance for our seeds to grow well, we should buy special soil that's been fortified with nutrients and things. I always thought dirt was free, and more or less the same! But having dirt with the right pH balances, and things like that, can make a difference in what you're trying to grow – and certainly makes a difference in price! I learned the other day, for example, that Vidalia onions – those onions that are known for being pretty sweet, as onions go – have the sweetness they do because of lower levels of sulfur in the soil. On the flipside, research is showing that sweet corn and watermelon do better with more sulfur in the soil. What works for one seed or plant type may not work for another, and the same can be said of people. For some, Sunday morning is the ideal time to gather together and worship God. For others, that's when hockey practice is, or swimming lessons, or maybe just the only day of the week they have time to eat breakfast together as a family, or the only day they get to sleep in. We live in a very different society than the one in which church as we know it was established, and yet we often expect people to re-conform to fit themselves into these expectations. Sometimes they do, and that's great! But other times, we may need to take a look at how we're doing things, and consider other options. Is what we're doing the right kind of soil to help these metaphorical seeds of faith grow? Are we giving them enough water? Are we giving them too much water? Because, speaking from experience, that can be just as much of a problem.

There's a big push these days, in mainline churches, to do what they call “Fresh Expressions” of church. This can be something from meeting to discuss faith in the pub or the laundromat or coffee shop to doing things like Messy Church, where children and families can come together to learn about God in ways that may be a bit outside of our understanding of church. These groups often create strong communities, and cater to the needs beyond a Sunday morning service. They often start small, but that doesn't make them any less important, or any less beautiful, or any less “church”. Because, really, the importance of being Christian is not coming to a certain building or place, but about worshipping God and loving and serving one another. That's something we've seen quite a bit during the pandemic. We keep using the phrase that “the building is closed, but the church remains open”, because the church is not the building, but is the people, each one of us, that brings this building – and the community around it – to life. It's about the connections we make, and the seeds we plant, whether or not folks attend church or stick around for a long time.

We may not be around to see the results of the seeds we plant, but God sees and celebrates them all. May we go out into the world around us, planting seeds and praying for them to grow!

Amen.