

## Reflection on the Word: June 17, 2018

### 1 Samuel 15:34-16:13; Mark 4:26-34

He was just a boy, so young and apparently insignificant that his own father didn't consider him worthy to be presented before the traveling prophet Samuel. Sure, David was good looking, and he had some talent, but by and large everyone who knew him assumed he'd spend his days as an adult the same way he'd spent those of his youth: tending sheep, playing with his sling, writing poetry, and playing music. He was hardly a suitable replacement for a great warrior king like Saul. Yet David, the least of Jesse's sons and the unlikeliest of leaders, was chosen by God and anointed by Samuel to be King over God's people Israel. It was just like the God of Israel to do something so totally unanticipated.

Or was it? God had, after all, chosen a pair of skeptical senior citizens named Abram and Sara and promised them that they would have descendants numerous as the stars, so many that they would comprise a whole nation of God's chosen people. And when those descendants were enslaved and oppressed by the power of the Egyptian Pharaoh, God called upon a stammering fugitive named Moses to take up their cause and lead them to freedom.

And so why should it be surprising that when Israel demanded a king, God responded by choosing so improbable a candidate as David? It is, quite simply, as Pastor Joel Shuman puts it, "the way the God of Israel and of Jesus works: divine power manifest in human weakness, divine purpose made present in the midst of human folly." In other words, God's choices, God's actions, don't always make sense to us!

Like in the parable of the mustard seed from today's gospel reading ... Mark's fourth chapter begins with Jesus teaching a large crowd alongside the lake. His topic, as always, is the kingdom of God. His method is imaginative storytelling where he employs common, everyday images to teach heavenly truth. The kingdom of God is like one who scatters seed not knowing whether or how it might grow. The kingdom of God is like...a mustard seed.

I can imagine the crowd being surprised at this unlikely comparison. No doubt, they would expect Jesus to say that the kingdom of God is like a fortress, like a city of gold or a forest of mighty redwoods. But no, Jesus says, the kingdom of God is like a tiny seed. Like the parable that precedes it, about the sower who spreads seed on different kinds of soil, this image has been interpreted a variety of ways. Usually, interpretations center on God as the sower, the seed as the gospel message, and we humans as the dirt ... the ones called to be fertile ground, good soil, for the growth of God's kingdom.

But when I think about the church in 2018, I wonder ... what if we are *not* the soil but the sower? What if we are the ones to whom the precious mustard seeds

have been entrusted? This interpretation shifts the church from passive recipient to active planter of the kingdom of God.

Thinking about it this way, the parable offers a powerful promise to those of us who have the courage to sow the seeds we've been given. The promise is this: growth will come. That part is not our business and certainly not under our control. The sower scatters and then sleeps. And growth happens. The sower doesn't even know how.

So it is with us. We just plant the seeds we've been given. We tell stories. We offer genuine invitations. We share others' joy and pain. We do our part. But we do not get to decide which seeds will grow into towering trees and which will rot in the soil. Our part is to sow the seeds faithfully; the growth is God's part.

I think of a grandmother in a former congregation I served, who saw many young mothers in her community who needed a place to gather with their preschool children, a place to socialize and share concerns about parenthood and raising a child. The church hall was a big space that was not being used on Friday mornings, so that grandmother sought out a few others to work with her, solicited some donations of toys for the children to play with, and invited a few young mothers to come to what was called "Parents n' Tots." Eventually those mothers told others – and on any given Friday morning there might be 25 or more moms and dads with their young children, gathered to talk and support one another over coffee and light refreshments, while their children enjoyed playing together and learning the social skills of cooperation and sharing.

A tiny seed grew into a bush that made a place of belonging and nurture for many who might otherwise never have known each other. Some in the church grumbled, because it didn't bring more people to fill the pews or the offering plate on Sundays. But it did plant seeds in those parents' hearts that the church was a place that cared about them ... and who knows how those seeds might take root and grow by God's grace.

I think of those in our own congregation, who sowed seeds of care and outreach in establishing the community kitchen which now feeds anywhere from 40 to 60 or more people each week and provides a gathering place for those who may be as much in need of some socialization and a kind word of welcome as they are of food.

I think of how our benevolent fund plants seeds of compassion and support in providing for groceries, heating costs, transportation to medical appointments. And how, just this week, we helped to cover graduation fees for a young high school graduate, living in a troubled home situation. She would not have been able to attend her baccalaureate service and graduation ceremony without the assistance we, combined with the Retired Teachers' citrus fund, were able to give. And I wonder, how might that act of caring help shape her future?

Small seeds sown in faith that they will grow and make a difference... It reminds me of the words of "The Garden Song" written by David Mallett, made popular by John Denver:

Inch by inch, row by row

Gonna make this garden grow  
 All it takes is a rake and a hoe  
 And a piece of fertile ground.  
 Inch by inch, row by row  
 Someone bless these seeds I sow  
 Someone warm them from below  
 Till the rain comes tumblin' down.

This is where the parables of the scattering sower and the mustard seed meet the story of the church and our journey of faith. We are called to courageously and joyfully sow seeds, to scatter what we have been given, trusting that God will bless the seeds we sow.

Remember ... God's reign, God's kingdom, begins in insignificance, like a tiny mustard seed, and then it develops, grows, and matures, til it becomes a shrub *big enough* for birds to make their home in it. And yet, it remains lowly, like a King who enters a city humble and riding on a donkey, who comes not to be served but to serve.

The Kingdom of God is great in its humility ... stooping to wash feet; kneeling by wounded strangers on the side of the road. It is lifted up, not like the Stanley Cup, on the shoulders of heroes and winners, but on a cross where all creation is reconciled to God.

This lowly shrub is big enough for birds of every kind to find a home: Jew and Gentile, male and female, black and white, gay and straight, rich and poor. Birds of every feather can flock together because this shrub, this Kingdom, this Gospel, this God, is big enough.

If only all of our churches and hearts were so big.

We live in a time in which the influence of the mainline Christian church is waning. We worry about whether the church can survive and stress over the decline in numbers and resources, prompting us to focus more on our own needs than on our mission; we feel threatened by census reports about the increasing diversity of faiths other than Christian in our country; we are troubled by the rise of the "Nones" - those who have no religious affiliation at all.

Perhaps we think our work of scattering seed is in vain. Maybe we believe the soil or the seed has gone bad, and will produce nothing for our efforts. Perhaps we're afraid our own gifts and talents aren't big enough for the harvest we need. And that may be so.

The good news, though, is the harvest isn't dependent on our efforts alone. The seed will grow without us, but the seed of the gospel, of the Kingdom of God, still needs to be sown. And the promise of its potential life remains in the power of the seed, not in the power of us, the sowers.

So, instead of letting dark clouds of worry about declining membership and shrinking coffers rain on those who come through our door and discourage those already in the pews, we need to focus on what it is about our congregation that

we value. What assets—both tangible and intangible—do we possess as a community? And how are we willing to use those assets, to make a difference in the lives of others, which will also make a difference in our own lives. We must not despise the small things we can do to further the kingdom values of love and peace, inclusion and belonging, forgiveness and justice.

After all, God was at work changing the world through the anointing of a teenage shepherd as king. And what less likely beginning for the establishment of God's reign than a peasant teacher from Galilee and his rag-tag group of disciples?

*These* were the people through whom God was going to change the world? Where was their power or importance?

It was in the heart that heard the call of God and in hearts that had been transformed and empowered by the Spirit of the risen Christ. It was in the commitment of those who trusted that when they sowed the seeds, God would bring the growth – the growth of his Kingdom of life and love for all.

We are part of a relatively small, mostly unremarkable group of people who live together here in Miramichi, doing the best we can to raise and love our families, pay our bills, and live lives of meaning and purpose. On Sundays we gather to worship God, to celebrate community, to find strength and direction for the week ahead, to be inspired to reach out as best we can to meet the needs of God's people around us.

We are Kingdom workers, not Kingdom bringers or Kingdom savers. We scatter with abandon the seeds of faith and love that we have been given, small as they may seem; we extravagantly spread the good news of God's grace, all the while trusting that through our efforts, and the efforts of others, God will bring the growth.

It's been said that every act of service, every effort of justice, every act of peace, healing, and reconciliation will not be overlooked by God, but will someday grow to bring forth results that we cannot imagine. God is redeeming the world through mustard seed churches and ordinary people who give themselves to the love and grace of God.

Inch by inch, row by row, let us work to help God's Kingdom grow! Amen.