

MARK 4:26–34. (EHV)

[Jesus] said, “The kingdom of God is like this: A man scatters seed on the ground, and while he sleeps and rises, night and day, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. The ground produces fruit on its own: first the blade, then the head, then the full grain in the head. When the crop is ready, he swings the sickle without delay, because the harvest has come.” Then he said, “To what should we compare the kingdom of God? Or with what parable may we picture it? It is like a mustard seed, which when sown on the ground is one of the smallest of all the seeds planted in the ground. Yet when it is planted, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches so that the birds of the sky can nest under its shade.” With many similar parables he continued to speak the word to them, as much as they were able to hear. He did not speak to them without a parable. But when he was alone with his disciples, he explained everything to them.

“The kingdom of God is like this: A man scatters seed on the ground, and while he sleeps and rises, night and day, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. The ground produces fruit on its own: first the blade, then the head, then the full grain in the head. When the crop is ready, he swings the sickle without delay, because the harvest has come.”

Every child who has ever planted a seed in a styrofoam cup, every adult who has planted a garden, every farmer who has planted a field, knows exactly what Jesus is talking about here on an earthly level. What do we do? We find soil, we get a seed, we stick the seed in the soil, and one day there’s just soil, and the next day—look at that!—there’s a sprout. And while we eat, sleep, run errands, go golfing, play Pitch, and eat ice cream, those sprouts get larger and larger and start producing fruit. Sure, we water the plant if necessary. But we don’t cause the roots to absorb the water or the nutrients of the soil. All we did was plant the seed, and the soil produces fruit on its own. When the time comes, we go and harvest the produce.

So what’s the point Jesus is making with the kingdom of God? Jesus tells us when explaining a different parable that the seed is the word of God. So the man scattering the seed on the ground is the person who shares God’s word, whether it’s a public minister or any other Christian. But there isn’t a lot of the seed-scatterer in this parable, is there? It’s all about the seed and the soil. In fact, Jesus deliberately keeps us from thinking too much about the sower of the seed—“the ground produces fruit *on its own*.” The point is: We simply share God’s word; the power to convert and to strengthen rests in the Word itself. The apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 3, perhaps with this very parable in mind: “What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? They are ministers through whom you believed, and each served as the Lord gave him his role. I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but it is God who causes the growth.”

The Church doesn’t “sell” their product like the secular world sells their products and like we ourselves sell our earthly products. When Katie and I were looking for a new vehicle in Wisconsin, we went to one dealer to test-drive an older vehicle that had some rust underneath it. The salesman was very pushy. He had to ride with us on our test drive. He had to comment on various features of the vehicle. He had to ask us at regular intervals, “Well, what do you think?” All I could think was, “I don’t know; you haven’t really given me a chance to think.” Then, as

we were pulling back into the dealership, he tried to pressure us into buying that day. When I told him that, no matter what, we weren't going to buy anything that day and we were going to test-drive some other cars first, I saw him in the rearview mirror turn his head and roll his eyes, and he didn't treat us very nicely any more. He must have figured that if we didn't fall for his tactics, he wasn't going to get the sale. And he turned out to be right.

We also test-drove another newer vehicle and had a similar experience. The salesman actually promised us when he asked us for some personal information that nobody from the office would follow up with any pestering phone calls. Later that week someone from their office called and left a pestering message on my voicemail.

Then we went to another dealership. The lady at the desk told us a salesman would be out with us in a minute. Out came a older, grandfatherly-looking gentleman. He said hi and shook our hands and asked us how he could help us. We told him we wanted to test drive a couple vehicles in the lot. He went and got the keys, tossed them to us, and said, "Have fun." What a difference between the pushy tactics of the first two salesmen and the salesman who simply went around scattering keys, so to speak! Some of that difference was because, as he told us, "car salesmen have to buy cars too." But I think some of the difference was also that the cars in the third salesman's lot were almost all highly rated in magazines like *Consumer Reports*, and so he didn't have to put a lot of pressure on us. He just had to let people experience the company's vehicles for themselves, and their vehicles would essentially sell themselves. We ended up buying our current vehicle from that dealership.

The same and more is true for Christianity. We don't have to artificially make God's word appealing. We don't have to use pressure tactics. We have a product that sells itself and grows on its own—namely eternal righteousness, peace, joy, and life in the name of Jesus, God's Son—righteousness, peace, joy, and life you cannot find anywhere else. In fact, the more we try to imitate the world in selling our product, the more we'll either turn people off to God's word or the more we'll look like a worldly business and the less we will focus on God's word, just like the world doesn't focus on it. God's word is like seed and soil. Just plant it, that is, share it, and it will take care of itself.

Jesus uses seed again in his next parable, but he makes us think a little and the point is different. You can tell from the start that what he is trying to illustrate doesn't really have a good correlation in nature. God, who is spirit, has put all sorts of reflections of spiritual truths in nature, which is why Jesus could find all sorts of illustrations of the kingdom of God in nature. But the illustrations will always only go so far, and some truths will be very difficult to illustrate because, after all, we're talking about a supernatural God. Jesus starts by asking, "To what should we compare the kingdom of God? Or with what parable may we picture it?" He's trying to cover and teach all sorts of aspects of God's kingdom, but he's having difficulty teaching the aspect he has in mind now.

He wants to illustrate on the one hand, the kingdom's humble appearances and seemingly insignificant beginnings, and for that he doesn't have a problem. "It is like a mustard seed, which when sown on the ground is one of the smallest of all the seeds planted in the ground." You can buy mustard seed at the store. It's very small.

“Yet when it is planted, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants.” So you plant this small seed, and it does what seeds and soil do. It sprouts and grows, night and day, whether you sleep or get up. Only this plant grows taller than your tomatoes, taller than your peas, taller than your green beans, squash, radishes, yes, taller even than your sweet corn. Some think that the precise species of mustard Jesus is talking about is what’s called Black Mustard. Normally Black Mustard reaches a height of about three to five feet, but there are apparently cases where in moist, fertile soil it can reach a height of eight or nine feet or higher.

But Jesus continues: “It grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches so that the birds of the sky can nest under its shade.” Matthew and Luke are even more explicit, recording Jesus saying that the mustard seed grows and turns into a tree, and that the birds of the sky come and nest in its branches.

This seems like a bit of a stretch, especially if only one mustard plant is in view, and also since “the birds of the sky” is a label often used in Scripture for the the large, soaring birds like eagles, vultures, hawks, and owls. Those kinds of birds certainly do not nest and find shade in even the tallest mustard plants.

So it seems to me that what Jesus has done is to start with something real, an actual mustard seed, and turn it into something of legend, something that has not turned into an ordinary mustard plant, but a larger-than-life mustard plant with a thick trunk and branches strong enough for the largest birds to nest in.

Why would Jesus do that? Well, his point is this: Look at the humble origins and humble appearances of the kingdom of God, its workers, and their instrument, the gospel. The New Testament Christian church starts with twelve ordinary, mostly unschooled men called by Jesus from backgrounds that do not stand out. So too today, the pastor standing in front of you does not come from special breeding or a standout upbringing. I am essentially a human mutt, and while there are some spots in the family tree I love to talk about, there are also some shady spots. And I by no means mean to be insulting, but the same is true of most, if not all, of you, isn’t it? The apostle Paul told the Corinthians: “Think of what you were when you were called [to faith]. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth” (1 Cor. 1:26). I can repeat those words to you, and you can repeat them to me.

And look at the instrument the apostles used and that we continue to use—words. A message. A message that tells us of the very Son of God, true God and true man, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of a virgin, growing up, getting baptized, teaching, healing, eating, drinking, growing tired, sleeping, waking up, being arrested and put on trial, and dying a shameful death in his thirties at the hands of men as humanity’s substitute to pay for all of humanity’s sin. Three days later he rises from the dead, appears to more than 500 eyewitnesses, and several weeks later ascends into heaven, and so he is no longer visibly present with us in the flesh any more. As Paul told the Corinthians, that’s foolishness to the world. That’s a mustard seed.

But what has that mustard seed turned into over time, after being sown here and there by ordinary people? It spans the globe! It spans cultures that are very different, nations with governments that are practically opposites in philosophy and practice. And even though the sowing of that seed started in Jerusalem among Jesus’s own people, the Jews, Christianity isn’t just made up of Jews, is it? In fact, it is predominantly made up of Gentiles, people the Jews

considered unclean—just like the large, soaring birds like eagles, vultures, hawks, and owls were unclean in the Old Testament. Birds of every feather may and do flock together here in the kingdom of God, around God’s word, by the tremendous power of God’s word, which is the seed of God’s kingdom and defies all comparison.

Time for another Strieter story. For those of you who don’t remember, Pastor Strieter was a Lutheran pastor from the mid- to late 1800s. In the early 1850s, Pastor Strieter had a member of his small church who always went to sleep during church, as soon as Pastor Strieter started preaching the sermon. I’m sure none of you can relate, but it does still happen. The member’s name in this case was Daniel. Pastor Strieter talked to Daniel about it, and Daniel said he couldn’t help it. Pastor Strieter told him, “Let me give you a good piece of advice, sir. Come to church with the thought, ‘Today I am going to hear for once what the pastor has to say.’ Then, when you are there, pray really earnestly that our dear God would please drive the sleep away. If it comes anyway, then bite yourself on the tongue, and make it a good one.” Sure enough, it worked. From then on Daniel listened to Pastor Strieter’s sermons very attentively.

So, if Jesus’s parables are true, you would expect that there was now going to be fruit in Daniel’s life.

And there was. That small congregation actually ended up closing for a while, after a bunch of member families moved away. But a few years later, when some more people moved into the area, Daniel went to visit a different pastor about twenty miles away, in the days before automobiles, and asked the pastor if he would come to preach there on a regular basis. Daniel told the pastor that he himself would make all the arrangements for getting the pastor there and back, and would additionally give the pastor five dollars every time, which was a lot of money in those days. (According to the US Inflation Calculator, \$5 in 1913 was the equivalent of about \$160 dollars today, and this was around 1857.) The new pastor agreed, and he eventually asked Daniel what prompted him to do all of this. Daniel responded, “Yeah, Pastor Strieter sowed seed in my heart, and now it’s coming up.” A mustard seed had become a plant, even after the pastor who planted the seed was gone—and that plant was still growing.

As a result of Daniel’s efforts, together with the new pastor whose services he secured, the church was restarted in 1858—and is still around today.

Do you want this congregation to still be around in the next generation? Do you want God’s word to continue to be an important part of life in Winner and in the surrounding community for years to come? There’s no secret to it. Just continue to sow and scatter the seed of the kingdom of God, God’s word, especially the gospel of Jesus, and continue to support the sowing and scattering of that seed. It is amazing seed. It has power to grow and bear fruit on its own, and the fruit it will continue to bear is staggering. Look at the salvation and peace it has accomplished in your own life. It will continue to accomplish that work in the lives of others too. Amen.