

Sprout And Grow...But How?

Mark 4:26-34

Jesus also said, “The kingdom of God
is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground,
and would sleep and rise night and day,
and the seed would sprout and grow,
he 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 he goes in with his sickle,
because the harvest has come.”

Jesus also said, “With what can we compare
the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?
It is like a mustard seed, which,
when sown upon the ground,
is the smallest of all the seeds on earth;
yet when it is sown it grows up
and becomes the greatest of all shrubs,
and puts forth large branches,
so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

With many such parables he spoke the word to them,
as they were able to hear it;
he did not speak to them except in parables,
but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

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I.

I begin today by telling you that I am a wee bit conflicted about today's sermon. That is to say, I am not sure if what I have to say to you this morning will actually rise to the level of a "sermon," or if the words to follow will stubbornly remain within the realm of reflection or, perhaps, story telling. Which, if I'm being honest, is a constant dilemma. Moreover, it begs the question of what makes a sermon a sermon?

Regardless how each of you chooses to meet it, be it in-person, via the stream, or by reading, my assumption is that all of you come to this moment in the week with a certain expectation that ultimate realities will be discussed and, hopefully, illuminated. While opinion, recollection, and amusement maybe interesting, or even informative, any sermon worth its salt must rise to a certain standard of spiritual relevance.

II.

That said, speaking of ultimate realities week after week becomes taxing, if not tedious; for both the speaker and the listener. Not only that, but there are only so many ways of meeting such a challenge head-on. Certainly one must instruct, but the more worthy goal is to invite inquiry such that it might lead to self-persuasion. Which, I would maintain, is why Jesus so often turns to the parable as a means of illumination; with today's scripture reading being an excellent example.

Here in Matthew 4 we find Jesus speaking of seeds mysteriously sown and grown, and the might of the diminutive mustard seed. While the Kingdom of God sprouts and grows and the evidence is plain to see, it is hard to know just exactly *how* this happens, though Jesus seems to indicate it is the *little* things which matter as a little goes along way toward ensuring a bountiful harvest.

III.

Today, of course, is Father's Day. The occasion each year when we pause to celebrate and honor our fathers, as well as those men in our lives who have been like fathers to us. I have rarely met someone I would consider to be a "good man" who didn't have any number of fatherly men in his life to set an example, and provide both the encouragement and the counsel to support them on their journey to, and through, manhood.

This morning, in imitation of Jesus, I would offer you three stories about fathers and fatherly figures, parables if you will, in the hope that they might move you to self-persuasion about ultimate realities and, in so doing, hopefully meet the moment which a day such as this brings to us. Each of these stories unfolded this past week and, like all the stories I spin from the pulpit, are very much true. That they might also be spiritually telling, I must leave for you to decide.

IV.

Apparently some of the Seniors at the high school, those who are into cars, got together and decided that on the last day of school they would drive a different, that is special, vehicle. Though I do not know the details of how this came to be, I heard through the church grapevine that Cameron, a car fan himself, was eager to join in the fun and drive something *other* than the family's Toyota Camry to school on his very *last* day of public instruction.

It would seem that, having been made aware of his earnest desire, the "car fairy" granted his wish and come this past Tuesday, the last day of classes, Cameron found himself driving to school in a pretty much brand new Toyota Tundra pick-up truck. As you might well imagine, this created no small amount of delight in the heart of young Cameron, as can be clearly seen in the photographs I subsequently received (two of which I have included in the narrative sermon which gets emailed to everyone).

V.

Not unlike the genie in the bottle from whom you should be careful for what you wish, one would do well to watch with wariness for the whimsies of the Car Fairy. *Especially* when the Car Fairy is Barry Walch. No sooner had Barry dropped off his truck to Cameron Tuesday morning before school did he

have the impish idea to find his truck where Cameron had left it in the student parking and use his spare key to move it to another location in the lot unbeknownst to Cameron. I mean, who possesses such a combination of hutzpah and hilarity to even conjure *up* such an idea!?!

However wily “Barry the Car Fairy” may be, all of us who know him are well aware that kindness is his truest color. Recognizing that poor Cameron’s heart might very well just stop beating if he were to walk out of school to find Barry’s truck “missing” from the lot, Barry rightly decided it is the thought that counts.



VI.

While loaning one’s truck to a young man so he can come to understand how cool and special we believe him to be is an admittedly small gesture, such small things lead to, and add up to big things. Such as that young man coming to discover and believe *in himself* that he every bit as cool and special as we know him to be.

In today’s scripture reading Jesus seems to tell us that it is through such small means, moments, and acts of magnanimity that the Kingdom of God is built and comes to fruition. Moreover, it is in these same small acts that fatherliness flourishes and is to be found; as Barry, and Master Sean, Jim Franklin and so many others have so adeptly and kindly shown to Cameron for many years now.

My oh my, how those years fly by, however; as we all know they will do. We are reminded that if we, as a church, want to matter *later* in big ways, we must start by mattering *now* in all the small things that we do.

VII.

This past Wednesday morning I was given a vivid reminder of just how much a lifetime of little things adds up to at the end. I was called to the hospital to offer a prayer at the bedside of a man who, after 90 some years of leading an exemplary life, was mercifully being called home to God.

Larry Aldous was an old timer from Brick Chapel I came to know, greatly admire, and deeply respect during the 20 years I have led worship there in the summer. While I was relieved that his would be a gentle death, I mourned the hole his absence has left in my own life; and, even more so, in the lives of his wife, children and their families.

Let me tell you, being with folks and their family at such a tender time, is an *extremely* humbling experience as everything that truly matters is laid bare. As I finished the prayer and was saying farewell, the teary eyes of his wife and each of their three children told the tale of a devoted husband and loving father who brought so much to the world and his family, in all the small things he did.

VIII.

Our third and final story begins as I returned to the cottage from the hospital to rejoin Linda and our guest, John Goetze, whom we had invited out for lunch that day. The term “lunch” might be a bit of a misnomer, though, as it lasted *five* hours. Which, if you know anything at all about John, is *well* within the realm of possibility. Not only is he an enthusiastic conversationalist, extravagant story teller, and very quick witted, John is also a very good listener. Add to that my own verbosity and Linda’s talent for inviting dialogue, and you can correctly imagine these were delightful hours which passed all too quickly.

Long-time members of our church, John and his beloved wife, Anne, moved to Florida well before I arrived. In recent years, though, we’ve become friends and it has been my privilege to support him as he lovingly and tenderly cared for Anne in the small ways to which he was limited as her body and mind

declined. Suffice to say, the past few years have been difficult and trying for both of them, and I am grateful for the mercy God has now bestowed upon them.

IX.

As you can also imagine, many stories were told, memories recollected, and conversations had over the span of those five hours Linda, John, and I shared together. All of which strengthened the bonds between us and deepened our mutual esteem and fondness. We also had a lot of fun and shared more than a few belly-laughs. John is in his 80s, so he goes back a long way in Canton where he and Anne raised their boys, at SUNY Canton where he worked for many years, and here at our church. I was intrigued by tales of this same place but in a different era, and to hear of people I know *now* as he knew them *then*.

During the span of our afternoon together I was also struck by the realization that so long as Johns draws breath, he is father to his children and husband to his wife. The role of abiding presence, I believe, is one to which dads are uniquely well-suited. Serving as an abiding presence is also one of the little things we do as people of faith to mysteriously sow and grow the Kingdom of God and ensure it a bountiful harvest.

X.

I have shared these three stories with you today because too often we are like the person portrayed in the parable of the sower. As fathers, and as a church, we sow seeds and watch them sprout and grow but are puzzled by how this happens. I, myself, certainly feel this way with regard to my three children, as well as this church of ours.

Really, though, there should be no mystery. When we sow the mustard seeds of nurture, kindness, guidance, love, and abiding presence, we provide the modest means, moments and acts of magnanimity upon which the Kingdom of God is built and is brought to fruition.

XI.

We began today with the question, "What makes a sermon a sermon?" What I have come realize is that whatever spiritual relevance a sermon may have is less about what *I* write or say and much more what *you*, the listener or reader, do with it. I have been on the ground studying the field for a great many years now. Please hear me when I say that *all* of you are doing so much, and doing it well, each in your own way, in all the small things you do.

Dads, as you go from here today, end the stream, or finishing reading, please know how much you have done and are doing in the lives of your children. All of which will be added unto them, and you, right up *until* the end, and will see you through *at* the end. Moreover, all of us in this church should depart secure in the knowledge that all the things which seem so small now, will loom large later. As they always have, and always will; world without end. Amen, amen.