

Mark 4:1-10,13-20

Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching, he said to them: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." And he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables.

And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold."

Mark 4:21-32

He said to them, 'Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand? For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!' And he said to them, 'Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you. For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.'

He 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.'

He 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.'

The Kingdom of Heaven is like this...

A gardener is going out to sow seed. He has a big bag full of mustard seed, which is one of the tiniest seeds on earth. And his bag is full. So, he has a lot of seeds.

The mustard plant is what biologists call an aggressive invasive species.<sup>1</sup> Once it gets root, it grows quickly, and it's very difficult to completely get rid of. It's kind of like kudzu, if you're familiar with that. Gardeners don't like to have mustard in their gardens, if that's not what they're trying to grow. It tends to choke out everything else.

When the elementary school kids plant seeds out in the community garden, they're so very careful. They only plant seeds in the beds of good soil that we trucked in for them. They ever-so-carefully dig a little hole for each individual seed, and put the seed in, and cover it up and pat it down. They water each seed, careful not to water it too much.

The gardener doesn't do that. He knows what kind of seed he is planting. He doesn't worry about being efficient with his seeds. He doesn't worry about modern technology to tell him exactly which square foot of the garden would be the best soil and get him the most productive yield.<sup>2</sup> He doesn't plant his seeds one-by-one. He doesn't worry about digging little holes, to maximize the potential for each seed. He doesn't even worry about trying to miss the beaten-down path he's walking on

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<sup>1</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brassicaceae>.

<sup>2</sup> Yes, such technology exists. It integrates GPS technology and I'm told that it is built into some tractors these days.

when he's sowing the seed. He walks along, throwing whole handfuls of the seed up into the air.

Some of the seed falls on the path, and just sits there on the hard ground. The birds eat it as soon as the gardener is out of arm's reach.

Some of the seed falls on rocky ground, and it grows up quickly, but most of it doesn't last long. A little of it lasts.

Some of the seed falls in among weeds and thorns, and the weeds kill most of the crop before it can grow. A little of it grows, even in the weediest area.

But some of the seed falls into good soil and produces a huge crop! Over time, the mustard plants grow up six feet tall, and produce hundreds of seeds. Those seeds blow in the wind, and fall all over. More seeds fall into that rocky ground and the weedy area. Those seeds join the few plants that survived in those challenging areas, and start the process all over again.

For a while, the field will be divided into mustard and weeds and rocks.

There may be a fire, and the mustard that the gardener planted will shrink for a while. But the mustard grows again.

Weed seeds may get blown in, or even deliberately planted by someone who doesn't like the gardener. But the mustard grows again.

Each time, the mustard that's left produces lots of seeds, which blow all over the field.

Over enough cycles like this, the path gets grown over and disappears.

Over enough cycles like this, the weeds are choked out and die.

Over enough cycles like this, the plant roots break up the rocks into soil.

Jesus Christ was born into the world in a poor backwater province of the Empire. He taught anyone who would listen to him about God and about love. Because God is love.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus wasn't careful about how he loved. He didn't hold himself back to love only the right people, at the right time. He loved Jews and Samaritans,<sup>4</sup> Jewish nationalists<sup>5</sup> and collaborating tax collectors.<sup>6</sup> He even loved Roman soldiers<sup>7</sup> and people associated with the Roman puppet king Herod.<sup>8</sup>

He taught his followers to love their neighbors and to love their enemies,<sup>9</sup> and he practiced what he preached. He even loved the people who were killing him enough to ask the Father to forgive them, while they were killing him!<sup>10</sup>

Love is like a mustard seed. It starts out as just a little tiny thing. It doesn't look like much at all. But let it start growing, and it will slowly take over your life and your world and the larger world around you.

There is no place that love cannot grow. There is a little of it even in the rockiest ground imaginable. But there are places where it's easier than others. There may not be a lot of it, it may not seem to thrive at first, but it will spring up, whether we're expecting it or not.

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<sup>3</sup> 1 John 4:8, 16.

<sup>4</sup> The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-38), the Samaritan leper healed in Luke 17:11-19, the Samaritan woman at the well and her village (John 4:7-40).

<sup>5</sup> Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot's nicknames both show Jewish nationalist origins. Today the Iscariot movement might be labelled terrorists.

<sup>6</sup> Levi, or Matthew, was recruited to follow Christ right out of his tax booth in Mark 2.

<sup>7</sup> He heals the centurion's "servant" in Matthew 8:5-10 and Luke 7:2-10.

<sup>8</sup> Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, was one of the women who traveled with Jesus and paid the bills (Luke 8:3).

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 5:43-45.

<sup>10</sup> Luke 23:34.

Where love grows, human beings look at each other not with hatred, but with love. Differences in how we are made are examples of God's amazing creativity, not reasons to think less of anyone. Whether those differences are gender, or skin color, or how we are physically built. How old we are, or are not, or what languages we speak, or whom we choose to build a life with.<sup>11</sup>

Where love grows, we treat other human beings like family. Because we understand, not just intellectually in our heads but in our hearts, that we *are* family. All of us!

That means that where love grows, children don't go to bed hungry.

Where love grows, poverty becomes a historical thing, not a current reality.

Where love grows, there really is justice for all.<sup>12</sup> Justice for ALL. It "rolls down like a mighty stream," unstoppable.<sup>13</sup> Because justice is simply what love looks like in public.<sup>14</sup>

Where love grows, we set aside weapons of war, not because they're evil, but simply because they're unnecessary.<sup>15</sup>

Where love grows, we thank God for forgiving us! And we try not to do again what needed forgiveness. Just like God forgives us, we forgive other people.<sup>16</sup> Even those people.

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<sup>11</sup> Galatians 3:27-29, Colossians 3:8-11.

<sup>12</sup> *The Pledge of Allegiance* reference is intentional, of course.

<sup>13</sup> Amos 5:24.

<sup>14</sup> Thank you, Cornell West.

<sup>15</sup> Isaiah 2:4, Micah 4:3.

<sup>16</sup> Colossians 3:12-13.

Over time, as Martin Luther King said, "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend."

I don't know anybody who wouldn't, deep in their heart, want to live in the kind of world where love grows.

So how do we get there?

We live like we're already there.

I tell you; we have love like that right here in this room. We see it when we share the peace with each other, and when we share prayer concerns. This is a congregation that cares deeply about other people.

That is wonderful!

When you leave here, out there in the field, sow those seeds of love and compassion and generosity!

Not slowly and deliberately and carefully.

But sow them with abandon!

Everywhere you go!

Those seeds will grow.

You don't have to know how they'll grow.

God's got that.

When you need more seeds, when you're feeling tired and hopeless and cynical, come back here. That's part of why we're here every week.

God is changing the world!

We get to be part of it!

"Let anyone with ears to hear listen."

Amen.