

Sermon for June 17, 2018 – “Enough!”

11th Sunday in OT, Year B – Text: Mark 4:1-9, 26-34

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Is the harvest going to be big enough? We need to do more, do something, because if we don't have a bumper crop this year. We may have to sell the farm. My e-mail inbox is constantly filled with articles about how the church can't survive the current decline in worship, why millennials are leaving the church, the rise of the “None’s” who have no religious affiliation at all, and all about the church's waning influence. Mixed in with all these are letters to the dying church. We're afraid the local church is going the way of the family farm so, we'd better do something. It's not enough to scatter seed, we need to genetically **alter** the seed so that it grows more easily in any kind of soil, so that it produces more, so that it's heartier, healthier and more resilient. We need a Gospel that'll grow in today's world so, let's create a hybrid. We need a bit more prosperity to go with this Gospel to the poor, a bit more glitz and glam to graft onto this humble Gospel. Still, just changing the seed isn't enough. We also need to change the soil the seed grows in...Yeah, that's the ticket! Let's change the worship, more lights, more entertainment. The Gospel can't grow in these tired, old, 1,000-year-old liturgies, after all! We need to till up the worship, break up the unplowed ground of these dusty old sanctuaries. We're afraid we aren't doing enough or aren't doing it well enough. Look at places like the Vineyard, or Crossroads. However, doing more is usually a sign that you don't trust what you're doing. We don't trust that the seed will grow. We don't trust the power of the Gospel to grow in and of itself. The reactionary response is to just throw up our hands and say: “Okay, God, if You want this Kingdom of Yours to grow then you'd better get to it.”

But the parable doesn't release us from all responsibility. Jesus isn't advocating *Field of Dreams* evangelism. Remember the movie? “Build it and they will come.” “Well, we put a sign at the road and we have worship so if God wants this church and His Kingdom to grow then God will bring in the people.” Unfortunately, even if you offer it they won't necessarily come though I think many of us wish that were the case. Right? On the other hand, the parable in our reading this morning shatters any illusions we might have that the fate of God's Kingdom is in our hands.

The Church isn't like some comic book movie where a rag-tag group of unlikely heroes must rise up to meet some dire threat to save the Kingdom of God on earth. Nope... We're not the Avengers, we're Kingdom workers. And notice I said Kingdom workers, not Kingdom savers, or Kingdom bringers. We plant the seeds and we prepare for the harvest, whenever it suddenly bursts from the earth. But, we ask ourselves, will it be big enough? It seems to get smaller every year. Fewer baptisms, fewer members, fewer pledges. It gets kind of scary, doesn't it? Will it be big enough?

The Kingdom starts like the smallest seed, a mustard seed, so, it's not looking great. How big could it get? Certainly not big enough to fill our sanctuary. Certainly not big enough to meet our budget. Certainly not big enough to put a dent in our neighborhood's problems. What is a small church in a small denomination preaching a small Gospel going to do in a great big world? I'll tell you what it's going to do. It's going to grow and become the greatest of all shrubs. That's what it does.

Wait...did I just say a shrub? Really? A shrub? The only people looking for shrubbery are Monty Python's Knights Who Say “Ni.” They want “one that looks nice. And isn't too expensive.” We want a forest of trees. We want a field of flowers. We want a plantation of cash crops. Not a shrub. We don't need no stinkin' shrub! Not even if it's the greatest of all shrubs. I think we prefer Ezekiel's cedar, the one in chapter seventeen, a big, strong tree that houses every kind of bird on the earth. Why can't we have a tree like that? Now that's big enough! We want Ezekiel's cedar. We want the tree...not the shrub. Yes, but we also want forbidden fruit. We want golden calves. We want our share of our father's inheritance up front. And, we want a Savior who doesn't have to die which tells me our judgment might not be as great as we think. Certainly not as great as the greatest of all shrubs.

Ezekiel's cedar symbolizes God's restoration of the Davidic Kingdom, an earthly kingdom mighty and proud. But, earthly kingdoms rise and fall. The bigger they are, the weaker they get and the harder they fall. Every empire that grows believing it can rule the world eventually topples like a felled tree. The mustard plant doesn't rise so high that it may topple and fall. It remains lowly, like a King who enters a city humbly riding on a donkey, who comes not to be served but to serve and who humbles himself to take the form of a servant. The Kingdom of God is great in its humility and lowness. It stoops to wash feet. It kneels by wounded strangers on the side of the road. It's lifted up – not on the shoulders of servants – but on a cross. This shrub's 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, introvert and extrovert. Birds of every feather can flock together because this shrub, this Kingdom, this Gospel, this God, is big enough! The Kingdom of God starts off small and grows of itself independent of our tricks, trends, and tampering. It grows in ways we cannot see and cannot know until it comes up out of the ground and becomes the greatest of all shrubs. Big enough for people to come from east and west, north and south, from uptown and downtown, to gather at the Table together. If only all of our churches and hearts were so big.

Perhaps at times we think our ministry's in vain. Maybe we believe the soil, or the seed, has gone bad so the fields will soon be left fallow. We're afraid our efforts and our talents aren't enough for the harvest we need. We're right. They aren't. The good news is that the harvest doesn't depend our efforts. The seed grows without us, but the seed still needs to be sown. The mustard plant is an annual. It requires renewed sowing to populate the earth. But the promise of new life remains in the seed, not the sower.

The harvest is coming, and it will **not** be of our own making or doing, but we get to bring that harvest in. On that day, we'll know just how those seeds we sowed grew in people's hearts. We'll marvel at all the ways the preaching and hearing of the Good News brought hope, peace, joy, and love. We'll wonder **when** it happened. We'll wonder **how** it happened. But then we'll remember. We'll remember that the Kingdom of God is like someone who goes out to sow seed and then sleeps and rises day after day, all while the seed sprouts and grows. he knows not how. And those tiny seeds, tiny like a mustard plant, grow to become the greatest of shrubs. Big enough for all the birds of the air to build nests in its shade. When that happens – we'll be amazed...but we won't be surprised.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.