

**“Let’s Grow Our Dreams”**

Mark 4:26-34

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I was compelled to share this joke with you when I heard this from one of our church congregation members.

A pastor had a kitten that climbed up a tree in his backyard and then was afraid to come down. The pastor coaxed, offered warm milk, etc. But, the kitty would not come down. The tree was not sturdy enough to climb, so the pastor decided that if he tied a rope to his car and pulled it until the tree bent down, he could then reach up and get the kitten. That's what he did, all the while checking his progress in the car. He then figured if he went just a little bit further, the tree would be bent sufficiently for him to reach the kitten. But as he moved the car a little further forward, the rope broke. The tree went 'boing!' and the kitten instantly sailed through the air - out of sight. The pastor felt terrible. He walked all over the neighborhood asking people if they'd seen a little kitten. No. Nobody had seen a stray kitten. So he prayed, 'Lord, I just commit this kitten to your keeping,' and went on about his business.

A few days later he was at the grocery store, and met one of his church members. He happened to look into her shopping cart and was amazed to see cat food. This woman was a cat hater and everyone knew it, so he asked her, 'Why are you buying cat food when you hate cats so much?' She replied, 'You won't believe this,' and then told him how her little girl had been begging her for a cat, but she kept refusing. Then a few days before, the child had begged again, so the Mom finally told her little girl, 'Well, if God gives you a cat, I'll let you keep it.' She told the pastor, 'I watched my child go out in the yard, get on her knees, and ask God for a cat. And really, Pastor, you won't believe this, but I saw it with my own eyes. A kitten suddenly came flying out of the blue sky, with its paws outspread, and landed right in front of her.'

This is a funny and hilarious story but it made us think about our faith whether we really trust in the power of God or we underestimate our almighty God. Sometimes, we trust more what we can do than what God can do for us. This story reminds us of this simple lesson to our faith: ***Anyone can count the seeds in an apple; but only God can count the apples in a seed.***

Today’s Scripture reading is talking about another kind of seed. Jesus taught his disciples about the Kingdom of God. He compared the Kingdom of God with a seed that the farmer throws on the ground and it sprouts and grows well. You may wonder why Jesus picks an image of the farmer and a mustard seed to describe the Kingdom of God. Jesus grew up in a small town named Galilee and

he was very familiar with the agricultural metaphors. The mustard plant was a mostly wild plant and a kind of weed we can see anywhere like blackberry today. Jesus got an insight from a seed of this plant and explained the meaning of the Kingdom of God. We need to understand a little bit of background of the Kingdom of God before we match the image of the mustard seed with Jesus' envisioning place for people. In Jesus' time, many Galileans and Israelites suffered from bad economic conditions like high debt, taxation and life in the colonies under the Romans. People were in despair, helpless and hopeless. Jesus shared God's Kingdom with his people. The Kingdom of God was not going to a heavenly place when we die, but rather he taught his disciples 'the living in the reign of God.'

In our Scripture reading, Jesus describes the Kingdom of God with two metaphors: One is like a seed thrown on a field by a man who then goes to bed and forgets about it. The seed sprouts and grows—he has no idea how it happens. The earth does it all without his help. The point is that once the seed is planted, it sprouts and grows irresistibly without our assistance. Like the smallest seed that the farmer throws on the ground, sometimes, it doesn't look very visible and active, but it never dies but survives. A while later, we are able to see sprouting and growing without our help. The Kingdom of God is like hope that never easily gives up but a power persistently keeps us moving forward. The purpose of Jesus' ministry was to expand God's reign in our lives, even though our life is overwhelmed by hardships, despair and hopeless conditions in life. God gives us hope. It sprouts and grows among us. There is nothing that we can do about this. Like Jesus reminded his disciple, the seed of hope will be sown and survive and sprout and grow until it bears the fruit. The Kingdom of God is like a seed of hope which is sown on the field of our lives, and grows among our lives.

The other one is a mustard seed. We often interpret this image of the mustard seed as an image of growth in faith. But this is a little bit naïve. We need to understand the meaning of the mustard seed in agricultural context at that time. The mustard is well known as a wild plant which is incredibly hard to control, once it takes root it can take over a whole planting area. That's why mustard would only occasionally be found in a garden in the ancient world. A theologian, John Dominic Crossan explains the meaning of the wild mustard this way in his book: "The point, in other words, is not just that the mustard plant starts as a proverbially small seed and grows into a shrub of three or four feet, or even higher, it is that it tends to take over where it is not wanted, gets out of control, and attracts birds within cultivated areas where they are not particularly desired. And that, said Jesus, was what the Kingdom was like: not like the mighty cedar of Lebanon and not quite like a common weed, [more]

like a pungent shrub with dangerous takeover properties.” (The Historical Jesus, pp. 278-279).

Jesus urged his disciples to be a dangerous and radical hope to the world. The world and the bitter reality try to take you down, depress you and make you give up, but do not give away your life but survive like the seed thrown and sown on the ground. Not only he talked about actively surviving, but he encouraged all of us to sprout and grow wildly and spread out hope all over the place. He ordered us to become out of control as the mustard seed of hope like the wild mustard plant. It sounds like a great lesson and challenge for us. Like Apostle Paul’s advice for his church folks, “And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what *is* that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” Jesus teaches us to be a good seed of hope, a new possibility and God’s reign in our lives is powerfully growing not only for surviving but also influencing and transforming our lives. Jesus Christ calls us to be the seed for this world.

What challenges does this parable give to us this morning? Every time I think of our church, I am very proud of our brave steps that we have made to our world and to our community. In 1993, we proclaimed that we are a reconciliation congregation and we opened our minds and doors. In 2006, we opened our doors and welcomed our Tongan community as our members. We demonstrated that church should be an agent of God’s inclusive hope and never limited love to everyone. I would like to challenge all of us here. What dream does our Fair Oaks church have, at least in the next ten years, for our community and to the world? Then envisioning next decade, how can we continue to make ourselves known to our community and continue to be hope to others and to our world? A small seed of hope was sown on this hill fifty years ago and this seed has been continuing to be alive and growing with God’s special purpose and direction. I hope our church envisions ourselves continuing to be a good seed of hope to our neighborhood and to the world. Go out and plant the seeds!  
Amen.