

SERMON

“SMALL AND WONDERFUL” TEXT: MARK 4: 26-34

JUNE 13, 2021 (PROPER 6) B

ASCENSION LUTHERAN CHURCH, OCALA, FLORIDA

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It is good to be back. I'm happy Pastor Wayne Kofink was at "in person" worship last Sunday while Cindy and I were in Pennsylvania where we met our grandson, Charles Benjamin Erzkus, for the first time. In a worship service "Charlie" and Emory Bishop (our youngest granddaughter here in Ocala) received the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, and it was my honor to baptize both of them.

While we were gone, the drought ended and some rain came. We could not believe how the garden had grown and how flowers looked double in size! Plants just took off and grew. Some of the plants that were so tall now, Cindy had started from seeds. It is amazing how they look.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus says, ***“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.”***

It is truly God's doing. I can't make a seed grow. Can you? God has created our world and nature in such wonderful ways that this just happens. We take it for granted, but it is a wonder, part of the wonderful world we live in.

Our Lord Jesus then goes on to talk about the mustard seed. ***“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”.***

This shrub is large enough for the birds of the air to build multiple nests in it. Yet it begins with only a small, tiny seed. So, from something small, the kingdom of God expands!

In preparation for this week's sermon, I consulted the late William Barclay's commentary on the Gospel of Mark. In my years as a pastor I've run across several good commentaries, but I think no one surpasses Barclay when it comes to down to earth examples that compliment his reading of the Scripture text. So, many of the examples in this sermon are borrowed from his writing.

Barclay notes how you add one drop of dye to a bowl of water. One drop does not make a lot of change in the color, but add a few more drops. The water begins to turn the color of the dye and eventually, the water has changed color and one can even dye a fabric the color of the water.

Our congregation is not large in terms of numbers. For the past 5 weeks our “in person” attendance has averaged 26. Our You Tube viewers are usually around 13-18. A guess at those who use our “take home” email service or use the slow mail version is perhaps 5-8? So, right now, on any given Sunday we may be reaching 44-53 folks, perhaps a few more. This is actually more than a given Sunday before the pandemic when we only did “in person” worship, yet the number seems small, doesn’t it? No matter, how small the number, what counts is what’s happening at Ascension.

We have expanded our worship outreach. We have done two food “give-aways”. We are preparing to begin a Children’s Church later this summer and hiring a professional teacher to lead this effort. Parents may keep their children in church for the entire service if they desire, or for the first 30-35 minutes, the children may be in Children’s Church and join the entire congregation later for Holy Communion. We are expanding our outreach. We also plan to find creative ways of inviting folks in our community to worship with us. Big splashes? Probably not. Significant drops? Yes!

On the outdoor sign board this week we put a message from today’s Second Reading: “For the love of Christ urges us on...” (2 Corinthians 5:14a) Do you think our society needs encouragement?

I was fascinated by William Barclay’s writing when he wrote the following: “We are living to-day in an atmosphere of despair. People despair of the church; they despair of the world; they look with shuddering dread on the future. ‘Man’, said H.G. Wells, ‘who began in a cave behind a windbreak will end in the disease-soaked ruins of a slum’.” Pretty optimistic, huh? And I think a lot of folks feel this way.

Now, the above quote is from Barclay’s commentary which was first published in 1954 and revised in 1975. But I thought these were “the good old days”. Even more helpful is what Barclay went on to say: “If God is the God we believe him (God) to be there is no room for pessimism. There may be remorse, regret; there may be penitence, contrition; there may be heart-searching, the realization of failure and of sin; but there can never be despair.” (p. 108, The Daily Study Bible Series. The Gospel of Mark, revised edition; by William Barclay)

Jesus says twice in today’s Gospel that the kingdom of God (or the reign of God) is like: plants growing from seed and no one makes this happen, it just

does; or a mustard seed, the smallest of seeds becoming the greatest of shrubs. From what would seem impossible beginnings, God has wonderful and awesome things happen.

The people of God in community are like that. How could a handful of disciples spread the Good News of Jesus across a planet? From small beginnings, God enables great things to be accomplished.

One more Barclay story. He tells of a congregation engaging an artist to design a beautiful stain glass window for their church building. The congregation took as inspiration the words of a hymn:

*“Around the throne of God in heaven
Thousands of children stand.”*

The artist finished a painting of the proposed window. During the night he heard noise in his studio. He found a stranger painting over his canvass. He said, “Stop, you will ruin the painting!” The stranger said, “I think you’ve done that already.” “How is that?” the artist asked.

“Well, all the children around the throne of God in your painting are white, the stranger said. Why did you paint your picture that way? “Well, that’s how I pictured them”, the artist replied. “I’m adding color”, the stranger said, “because some look more tan, or more yellow, or more red, or black. I know, because I’ve seen this. The stranger turned and the artist knew it was Jesus.

The artist woke the next morning and hurried to his studio. His picture looked as he had left it the night before. He had dreamt a very vivid dream. However, now he began to make changes to his work, painting some of the children black, or tan, or looking more red, or yellow, as the “stranger” had in his amazing dream. The committee from the church arrived to view his work. One of the members said, “Why! It’s God’s family at home.”

Like a mustard seed, the kingdom of God grows, and the shrub has room for all children and all people. The message every congregation gets to proclaim is not a human message but a Godly one. A hymn in our hymnal puts it like this:

“Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live,
a place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive.
Built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of grace;
Here the love of Christ shall end divisions: All are welcome,
All are welcome, all are welcome in this place.”

(Evangelical Lutheran Worship, Hymn 641)

Quite a message to proclaim!

Amen.