

“Wild Growth”

Mark 4.26–34

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 14 June 2009

It may be hard for us, who don’t live in an agrarian society to understand deeply what Jesus is talking about with all of the seed metaphors he uses in describing the kingdom of God. But then again, more and more of us seem to be putting in gardens in our backyards or even planting a few herbs in a window box.

In this passage from Mark’s gospel, Jesus uses two separate seed metaphors. Here’s the first one: “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.”

It reflects the natural world and conveys the idea of growth and development. The sower sows the seed, basically leaves it alone while she eats and sleeps; it develops from spout to stalk to full grain. But then, there is a moment of intervention. “When the grain is ripe” the sower gets her sickle and reaps, because “the harvest is come.”

How are we meant to know when something in our lives has matured, developed, and then we’re meant to take action? Have there been times in your life when something is developing nicely, and you step in and try to intervene and really muck things up? I’ve done that in conversations when I should have shut up, rather than speaking. And there are times when I’ve been silent when I should have chimed in. But, sometimes, if we’re paying attention, we can sense in another whether the time is right to open our hearts and our ears and just listen, or whether we can help affect a change by weighing in.

I sometimes think that we in the United Church tend to jump at too many opportunities, rather than focusing our efforts where they will have the greatest impact. At other times, we have been the first ones on the scene and are the first voice to be heard on issues that need to be addressed, whether the ordination of women in the 1850s or becoming an Open and Affirming denomination in 1983. The question is one of timing...of judging whether the time is right. The plant analogy is a good one: “first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.” It’s what the Greek-speaking authors of the New Testament would have called *kairos*, rather than *chronos* – the time is right, rather than the clock tells us that it’s time.

So, returning to my question, how do we know when the time is right? (This is something I need to work on, so this is one of the parts of this sermon in which I am preaching to myself!) Sometimes it means just sitting and observing. It isn’t passive or laissez-faire; it implies being attentive to the Spirit, which doesn’t happen so readily when you are chasing the clock and rushing headlong into your next meeting with a client or racing to get your kids to dance lessons on time. It also isn’t reactive. If you’ve ever watched a cat stalking its prey (or its owner) you know that observation requires focus and attention. The realm of God, Jesus says, requires that we use our powers of observation, and when the time is ripe, “at once,” he says, we move into action, kind of like a cat pouncing at just the right moment.

That first metaphor for the kingdom of God seems very regular and methodical, if not entirely predictable. The second, though, involves an entirely different kind of seed and growth: “the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 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.”

For us, in a culture that is bent on supersizing everything, it seems more than a little odd that Jesus chose the tiny mustard seed. But the mustard seed wasn't just the domesticated herb that we make Coleman's or French's or even Grey Poupon from – it is a noxious weed – probably more akin to that great Chinese mustard that sears your sinuses. Here is what Pliny the Elder, a Roman author who was a bit like the *National Geographic* of Jesus' day wrote about mustard in the first century: “with its pungent taste and fiery effect [it] is extremely beneficial for the health. It grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted: but on the other hand when it has once been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once.”¹ (Pliny, incidentally, took the *National Geographic* thing too seriously, and was killed by getting too close while investigating the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 A.D.)

So, the kingdom of God is like a noxious weed that is really potent and has a “fiery effect” and that will probably take over your garden if it gets too close.

Have you ever tried to control weeds without the use of an herbicide? It's virtually impossible to root them all out. I've been doing a bit of that in my fast-growing lawn: there are parts where what is growing is the weeds, and I've been pulling them out almost as fast as new ones are coming up. But even the garden-variety spurge and oxalis that grows in my lawn is nothing compared to the wild mustard that Jesus is talking about: it's going to take hold and overpower whatever gets in its way.

I wonder if one of the things that Jesus is challenging us to do is to acknowledge that we can't control the wildness of God's realm: that we can't put it in a box, define it, describe it, quantify it, to domesticate it, and try to control it.



A large contingent of Plymouth members has been attending the Annual Meeting of the Rocky Mountain Conference over the past three days, and I have a few observations that I'd like to share with you. First, I'd like to let you know how well represented you were. Over the parts of the meeting I attended from Thursday evening until yesterday afternoon, I counted **16** Plymouth members in attendance. We were meeting at First Congregational in Boulder, so it was close by, but it was fabulous to have such a showing of Plymouth folks attending and leading workshops, representing you (as Jim and Jean Clark and Bob Jeffrey did), tending to the business of the conference and the Northeastern Association, and really living into our covenant with the Wider Church. I also want to say a special word of recognition to George Worcester, who served as our interim conference minister during Tom Rehling's sabbatical earlier this year, and led the conference through some harrowing economic times.

I have to tell you that we at Plymouth are showing great leadership within the conference on several levels. First... we shared George Worcester, and I'm sure that Marcia will keep us from doing that again anytime soon! Next, Linda Mahan led a workshop as part of Healthcare for All Colorado. Janelle Combelic, who is now a member of First Congregational in Longmont, but who is a member in the hearts of many here, contributed a beautiful, evocative poem for a special service. And Plymouth folks are serving on wide range of conference committees: George serves on the board of directors; Sharon is on Personnel; Larry McCulloch serves on the Stewardship and Endowment Committees; Jamie Kepros is on Mission, Vicki Gardner-Placker is on Social Justice, and I've just agreed to serve on the Board of Directors of La Foret. So, way to go, Plymouth,

¹ see John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, (SF: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993) p. 65.

for showing leadership within the conference. Just as it is in the local church, the only way things get done is when folks seize the opportunity to serve.

I also want to reflect our leadership mission giving. Among more than 80 churches in the Rocky Mountain Conference, Plymouth's giving to Our Church's Wider Mission is **number three**, which is great. I also used the occasion to challenge other churches to increase their giving. In his address, George Worcester, who also serves on the UCC's executive council, told us some good news about OCWM: that among the top 50 or so congregations giving to Our Church's Wider Mission, five are from the Rocky Mountain Conference, and Plymouth is among them. The bad news is that overall giving to the national setting of the church through OCWM is abysmal. George told us that when he first attended General Synod as a minister in 1965, the annual budget of the church was \$12 million. And 44 years later, General Synod will be looking at a budget of \$11 million.

How do support missionaries abroad, create resources for local churches, provide a witness for justice and peace, and run a national church with less income than you had in 1965? Can you imagine trying to run your family budget on what it was in 1965? You don't have to have do too much extrapolating to see that our denomination is at a crossroads.

I know that you all value the witness the UCC provides nationally on issues from environmental racism to inclusion of people with disabilities to being Open and Affirming. I know that you value groundbreaking resources like the Our Whole Lives sexuality curriculum. I know you value the God Is Still Speaking campaign. Because these speak to who we are as followers of Jesus Christ in the 21st century. I know that I want the UCC to be around when my two sons are adults, and I'm willing to invest to make that happen. We have an important witness to bear across this nation, which has been our heritage for nearly 400 years.

Do you see what I see in the United Church of Christ? Do you see what I see at Plymouth? I see a mustard seed. I see a relatively small denomination that has what Pliny called, "a fiery effect." And, thank God, we're losing our desire to be a domesticated church. There is a certain wildness in the UCC's congregations, conferences, and national setting that give it a distinctive zest. Sometimes it's expressed as a passion for justice...or a commitment to mission... or the quest for knowledge...or palpable compassion... or a love for teaching...or an extravagant welcome. Our faith points toward the kingdom – God's realm of justice and peace. And so long as we continue that focus and keep sowing seeds, we will be living faithfully.

May our love for Christ, for God's reign, for our United Church, and for one another be the visible sign of our faith.

Amen.