

“The God That Grows”

Mark 4:30-32

Are you one of those “glass half-empty” people or one of those “glass half-full “people? Maybe it all depends on the day, and the circumstances and surroundings.

Cora Sexter was a resident at the Lovington Healthcare Center who died last September at the age of 103. Her family told me she had a saying that stayed with her throughout life: “Put a good construction on it.” By that, she meant that whatever came your way, do what you can to make the best of it. Like the old saying, “Put your best foot forward!”

The church of Jesus Christ has a calling, and that calling is to share the Gospel as best we know how. In sharing, our task, to use Cora’s words, is to put a good construction on it.

On the other hand...it’s a natural human tendency. With the passing of time, what was good enough for yesterday doesn’t quite seem sufficient for today...and we can easily become one of those “glass half-empty” kinda people.

Take automobiles. Growing up, our family had one vehicle. It was a 1959 Chevrolet Biscayne, three on the column. I learned to drive in that car. Handled like a boat. By the time I got to college, the car was still in the family; just not numero uno. And then, while in college...like magic...it became mine.

I was at the intersection of Alderman Road and Ivy Road by Saint Mark Lutheran Church. I was coming from the direction of Scott Stadium toward University Hall, and my brakes just gave out. It was early on a Saturday morning, so nobody was out and about. I just drifted through the red light and came to a stop in a parking lot that was across the street at the time.

The problem? A leak in the brake fluid line. Got it fixed the next week and was back on the road. But from that day forward, that old car became less and less a sufficient means of transportation to my way of thinking.

That 1959 Chevrolet Biscayne slowly became one of my half-empty glasses.

Listen now as I read some verses of scripture that pertain to the mustard seed, what it grows into, and how that growth relates to God’s kingdom.

Is what you are about to hear a matter of “*putting a good construction on it?*” Or is what you’re about to hear a witness to a developing mindset within the church: *what was good enough for yesterday doesn’t cut it anymore?*

Mark 4:30-32 ³⁰Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. ³²Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade." (NIV)

The kingdom of God likened to a garden plant? We can do better than that! Let’s try another translation.

Mark 4:30-32 ³⁰...the kingdom of God? ...is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown in the earth, is less than all the seeds that be in the earth: ³²But when it is sown, it groweth up, and becometh greater than all herbs...(KJV)

The kingdom of God likened to an herb? We can put a better construction on that.

Mark 4:30-32 "With what can we compare the kingdom of God...It is like a grain of 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...(RSV)

The Kingdom of God...compared to a shrub?

There's got to be another reading somewhere. Let's try Matthew's Gospel. Only in Matthew, we read about the kingdom of heaven instead of the kingdom of God.

Matthew 13:31-32 ³¹He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. ³²Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches." (NIV)

The kingdom of heaven...like a mustard seed...growing into a garden plant...and then becoming a tree. That sounds a little better.

Matthew 13:31-32 ³¹The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed...when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof. (KJV)

Mustard seed...great herb...tree!

Matthew 13:31-32 ...the kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field...when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches. (RSV)

I remember the tree part from my childhood...but I still don't recall any mention of plants and herbs and shrubs.

What about Luke's Gospel?

Luke 13:18-19 ¹⁸Then Jesus asked, "What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? ¹⁹It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches."

Found it. I just knew it was in the Bible somewhere. Funny, how in growing up, I just don't remember any of my teachers making the connection between mustard seeds, plants/herbs/shrubs and the Kingdom of God/Kingdom of Heaven. They must have, because there it is in the Bible; I probably just disregarded those "inferior" references. We are prone to hear the things we want to hear, and disregard that which we don't care much about.

Back to those Gospel accounts.

The Gospel of Mark was the first Gospel of the Bible to be written....Mark was already in print and on the shelf when Matthew and Luke were penned, so the writers of Matthew and Luke had the advantage of having Mark sitting there before them...at least that's not a stretch of the imagination.

Mark was no doubt aware of the size of a mustard seed, and to the very first Gospel writer it was quite the miracle that such a small seed would grow into a plant, an herb, or even a shrub. We'll never know for sure; with the varying witnesses, who is to say what Jesus taught?

Jesus may have taught all these versions at various times, and thus the different wordings. But the biblical witness is clear. The parable of the mustard seed was first written down...and the Gospel writer thought, "What a miracle. Something as small as a mustard seed can actually grow into an herb. The way God is able to grow us and His kingdom is very much like that!"

But with the passing of time...Were Matthew and Luke trying to put a good construction on this mustard seed thing...or was the thought beginning to creep into the church that what was good enough for yesterday wasn't quite good enough for today?

"This won't work. Jesus fed the multitudes, healed the sick, raised the dead, walked on water, and rose from the grave himself. The Kingdom of God is more than a plant; more than an herb; more than a shrub growing from a tiny seed. It's much grander than that. It's like planting the smallest of seeds and...and...and...and having a cedar of Lebanon sprout up right out of the earth and grow to the sky. That's how God works in this world!"

First, there was: "Hey, a shrub from a mustard seed? I'll take that any day."

Then followed: "Well, shrub from a mustard seed...that's OK...but then it becomes a tree...that's the ticket!"

Then followed: "You know, this idea of a shrub is a little deflating. Try this on for size. ¹⁸Then Jesus asked, "What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? ¹⁹It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became..... a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches."

Mark...the very first of the written Gospels that we have in our possession, records the words of Jesus where he likens God's Kingdom to the wonder of a tiny mustard seed that is planted and then grows to become the greatest of all.....shrubs.

Why would Jesus ever say such a thing?

First of all, he probably said it to encourage us.

"Take this little bitty seed and plant it inside in the winter. Give it water and sunshine and a little Miracle Grow. By the end of the summer it will grow into a plant several feet tall and produce a resource far beyond its small beginning. The Kingdom of God is like that!"

But as Jesus was encouraging us, he could also have been rebuking us.

"Take this seed of faith and put it to use. Plant it and water it and feed it and weed around whatever it is that comes up. Invest your entire life nurturing this seed of faith that comes to you by the grace of God. And if you remain faithful and serving and humble and giving, then along the way that small seed is going to spring forth into a sturdy plant. Don't pout that it isn't a cedar of Lebanon. Be grateful for the plant. The Kingdom of God flourishes as such things occur."

We must always be on guard against growing into a people who work at trying to convince ourselves that if anything significant were being done by God, it would have to be something big.

God's kingdom? Always put a good construction on it.

God's kingdom? Much of what was good enough for yesterday is still sufficient for today.

