

## Sermon for Sunday – October 29, 2017

Mark 4:26-34

### McClure's 51 Anniversary

If I visit the United Church book store on line – I will find a mountain of books dedicated to church renewal highlighted in the suggested reading section. If I turn to my Facebook news feed I find it constantly filled with articles about how the church – mainline churches like the Lutheran, Anglican and United churches - can't survive the current decline in worship attendance, there are articles about why millennials are leaving the church, and how there is an ever increasing rise in the number of those who have no religious affiliation at all. Even when I watched the news on TV – I see news about the struggling church. Just the other night CTV ran a clip about an Anglican Church in Russel Manitoba where the Priest, who rides to church on a motorcycle, and who has a background in theatre is trying to make his church more attractive. In the interview the priest tells the reporter how he “uses the tricks he learned in show business” to attract people to church. He tells the reporter that if we go to the churches website there is a movie clip. The movie clip looks like a trailer for a horror movie but really it is a creative invitation for people to come and check out his little Manitoba parish.

Churches everywhere are experiencing changing financial resource where the loss of a faithful contributor or two can have a huge impact on the bottom line and the ability of the church to meet its obligations. We here at McClure have been spending a great deal of time as of late considering our purpose and future - given this time of transition and our changing resources. It is a challenging time for us - it is a challenging for all churches - regardless of the denominational designation on the side of the building.

Some are afraid that the church universal is going the way of the family farm, so we better do something. And when we are afraid we do some interesting things. It's not enough to scatter seed; we need to genetically alter the seed so it grows more easily in any kind of soil, so it produces more, so it is heartier and healthier and more resilient. We need a Gospel that will grow in today's world, so some are convinced we need to create a hybrid. Some get to thinking that we need a bit more glitz and glam to make the Gospel a little more easy to plant.

For some, changing the seed isn't enough. Some suggest we need to change the soil the seed grows in. Let's change the worship: more lights, more entertainment, more tech. They are convinced that the Gospel can't grow in the simple ground of prayer and story, hymn and silence. We need to till up the worship.

Some are afraid we aren't doing enough or aren't doing it well enough. Some don't trust that the seed will grow. Some don't trust the power of the Gospel.

Some have thrown up their hands and said "Okay, God, if you want this Kingdom of yours to grow, then you better get to it."

But today's parable doesn't release us from responsibility.

This little parable reminds us that we are Kingdom workers, not Kingdom bringers or Kingdom savers. We plant the seeds and we prepare for the harvest, whenever it suddenly bursts from the earth.

But will it be big enough? It seems to get smaller every year. Fewer baptisms, fewer members, fewer pledges....Will it be big enough?

The Kingdom starts like the smallest seed the parable teaches, 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 city's need to care for those who live in poverty not big enough to care for all those who struggle.

What's a small church, a small denomination, a small Gospel, going to do in a big world? Well - It grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs. That's what it does. It becomes a shrub!!

We would prefer perhaps to be a mighty oak, an orchard of trees, we would like to be a field of flowers not just a pot, we want a plantation of cash crops, not a shrub. Not even the greatest of all shrubs.

But the mustard plant does not rise so high that it can topple and fall. It remains lowly, like a King who enters a city humble and riding on a donkey, who comes not to be served but to serve, who humbles himself and eats with those on the edges.

The Kingdom of God is great in its humility and simplicity. It stoops to wash feet; it kneels by wounded strangers on the side of the road. It is lifted up, not on the shoulders of the mighty, but rather it is lifted on a cross.

This lowly shrub of ours is big enough for birds of every kind to find a home: Jew and Gentile, male and female, young and old, 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 breaks forth from the ground and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, big enough for people to come from east and west and north and south, from left and right, from uptown and downtown, to sit at the Table together.

Friends our church did not grow out of some grandiose plans for a mega church - but grew from humble seeds – grew from a need for people to gather to worship and to teach their children the ways of Jesus. Over time there grew a need to create a place for Older Adults to live well within a vibrant community and so ground was broken.

Perhaps at times we think our being church is 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 big enough for the harvest we need. /// We're right: they aren't. The good news, though, is the harvest isn't dependent on 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 but the promise of its potential life remains in the power of the seed, not the power of the sower.

What I'm trying to say is "do not be afraid". It will be okay. Let's continue to pray and serve pie, let us continue to sing hymns and read to kids in the inner city, let continue to be still and sit with the ones who are grieving and let us hear the gospel stories but mostly let us just live them – we will be fine – we might be different but we will be God's people sowing seeds of the gospel and truly this is what God has called us to do.

Happy anniversary - Sowers of the Kingdom of God. Amen

### Mark 4:26-34

<sup>26</sup>He also said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, <sup>27</sup>and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. <sup>28</sup>The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. <sup>29</sup>But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

<sup>30</sup>He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? <sup>31</sup>It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; <sup>32</sup>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.”

<sup>33</sup>With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; <sup>34</sup>he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.