

*Texts: Ezekiel 17:22-24; Mark 4:26-34*

*Subject: Parable of the Mustard Seed*

*Theme: ReNEWedFor the World*

Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 13, 2021; *Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

A couple of years ago, we decided to have some grass put in our tiny back yard. It's a small area, where the kids and dogs would play. It lasted a little more than a year, and the heat last August just cooked it. Over the last few months, I've tried to re-seed, and give it the attention and maintenance it needs to thrive, but it's tough, and who has the time. We struggle to keep houseplants alive too, but that's another story. I was out in the yard the other day, pulling weeds from the sandy patches in the yard and feeding them to the chickens. They appreciate it. The kids were watching me pull the weeds, and saying "Weeds are terrible!" And while I mostly agree, I replied, "Weeds are just flowers growing in the wrong place." It's a quote I've heard over the years, from George Washington Carver, who happens to be the namesake of my junior high school. Maybe growing grass in a desert seems out of place. It used to be full of rocks and gravel and overgrown pomegranate trees and palms and scorpions. Maybe a cactus garden would be more appropriate, as dangerous as that might be for growing children and chihuahuas. What grows where, and who decides?

During the exile to Babylon about 2600 years ago, King Nebuchadnezzar not only took away the people of Israel, but blinded and deported their King Zedekiah, executed his children. The Babylonians didn't stop there, but destroyed the city walls of Jerusalem, and leveled the temple itself, the dwelling for Israel's God. Imagine just for a second how those people taken into captivity and those who remained behind might

have felt. How could they endure this? How could they survive, let alone rebuild? Their city was gone, their place of worship was trampled, and their families had been wiped out. They were like refugees with no help. The prophets spoke during this time, and didn't move directly to reconstruction, but gave room for truth telling and grieving. But there was hope for renewal as well. The prophet Ezekiel shares God's announcement of planting a cedar tree: "I myself will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit and become a noble cedar." The cedar was known as a symbol of power and strength, used in construction and for shipbuilding, that conjured images of longevity and hope. God's planting has a *glorious purpose*. These new cedars would not be to intimidate rivals, but to make a home for creatures, and every kind of bird - a place where life can flourish.

Do you hear the echoes of Genesis and the days of of creation? Can you hear about when God made all the creatures of the earth, sea, and sky? Also from Genesis we might recall the promise made to Abram (Gen. 12.3) that God would bless all the people of the earth through this chosen one. Life would flourish again. This was the hope. This was the promise. And the whole world would come to know God's generative, liberating, grace. It doesn't seem easy - it might even seem impossible, but God's not afraid to dig in the dirt.

When I served at Zion Lutheran Church in Iowa City, I was able to get to know farmers a little bit. I spent a day with Dave Schmidt and his son Ben, who invited me to ride in the combine as they harvested seed corn to be exported. I was excited to hear about their lives and the industry and lifestyle. They cared for their own land and for others. They watched the prices and the international markets. In large trucks they

carried the corn to massive grain bins, drive across the state, you'll see them dotting the land along the highways. These guys know a lot. Sowing seeds is an industrial endeavor these days. Genetically modified seeds get planted with satellite technology and state-of-the-art machines. But the seed grows the same. It goes into the ground. It needs water and sun and nutrients. It breaks open, and grows beans or corn. It is harvested and sold, carried overseas, for others to plant and use.

Jesus is teaching about seeds - though many of his disciples were fisherman, (we'll think about that another time). He's trying to teach them about the kingdom of God. It's all around them, and yet trying to describe it might seem difficult. This is a new vision, or is it *a renewed vision*? Into the ground goes the raw materials for growth. They are unseen there in the dark soil. Things happen in order: stalk, head, then grain. The seed grows when the time is right, it's harvested just when it is ready, and plucked up. It serves its purpose.

Maybe we feel as if we've been in the ground for the last 15 months. Maybe some of us longer than that. If you've had to stay home, far from friends and family, you might feel isolated, anxious, or angry at times. Maybe you're beginning to step out into public spaces again, maybe not yet. Some are traveling, others are not ready. We're all in different places still. I've personally felt like we're still waiting to see what happens next. What have we learned? What has been accomplished? Is something new being born right here and now? We'll know when the time is right, and like that seed that grows while the sower is sleeping, things change even while we're not watching. The kin-dom is here, even in the times we don't notice it.

Our church has learned to be online and in-person. We've reached out across the nation and invited others to participate in our mission. They respond as they worship with us, and give financial gifts to make ministry happen here in the heart of the city. We've provided food and supplies to struggling neighbors. We're learning what is most important, and seeing our relationships grow. If you got a chance to participate in one of our new vision gatherings, you know we're looking forward to welcoming others, and working to communicate clearly to the community around us who we are and to share the good news of God's grace. Things are changing, and we are being changed - not just for ourselves, but **for the world**.

Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a mustard seed. It must have made the people laugh. That little, seed is the kingdom of God? It might seem tiny, but after some time in the dark ground, getting what it needs, it becomes something bigger than we might imagine. It grows quickly and becomes so large that birds make nests in it. Our lives might seem like that seed. Too small, too insignificant to amount to much. Our church might seem like a mustard seed, tiny compared to some others around us. Our gifts might seem like the smallest of all, surely others have more to give.

But we are more powerful than we can even perceive. We have the Spirit of God in us and Christ is with us, planting and feeding us, forgiving us and leading us. Through the Word, God is finding us and filling us and sending us out. We are connected to the world around us, in partnerships and relationships, bound by the Spirit of God that has been working in us and on us, and with this community for over 70 years. The seeds they have sowed over the decades are still bearing fruit now. If you're here now, you are a part of this legacy of grace and humble service. We have received the blessings of

those who came before us, and are encouraged, empowered, and enlivened to go and serve God's people, to love them, and give voice to the presence of God's power and love in the world. What God has made us, he gives as blessings to those around us. We are **renewed for the world**.

Seeds are sown in our children, in the lives of the community and in partnerships like Family Promise, Lutheran Social Services, Nevadans for the Common Good, Martin's Mart and more. We're reaching out in coffee shops and hospital waiting rooms and rehab centers and recovery meetings. Our gifts go to ELCA World Hunger and Lutheran Disaster Response. We are part of a church in Christ Jesus that circles the globe. People know this place and more will come to know.

Even more importantly, Jesus knows us, calls each one of us loved and valuable, like one of those precious seeds. God is the sower who sends Jesus into the dark, dirty, beloved world to become for us what we cannot be for ourselves. He goes to the cross and breaks open his own body for us, and gives us what we need to be transformed, too. We receive God's grace, forgiveness, and new life in Christ, and the Spirit continues to work on us. Even if we feel like we don't belong, like a weed - like we have little to offer, we are changing and growing. We are enough as we are and we are becoming what God is molding us to be - mighty cedars and potent mustard trees. What we become is not for ourselves - like the mustard plant - it spreads out - it grows up, and creates a home for the creatures and the birds of the earth. We are a part of God's glorious purpose too. We are here and we are planted, ready to bloom and grow. As we go - we become something new - maybe resembling what we have been, or maybe

unrecognizable to our former selves. But no matter what, we have faith, and we trust that God is making us new, for the sake of all the creatures around us.

This is God's world - the kingdom is all around us.

We are the body of Christ. The Spirit renews us **for the world** and leads and guides us to what's next. Thanks be to God.

Amen.