

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost B 2024  
June 16, 2024  
Mark 4:26-34  
(Sermon by the Reverend Michelle Manicke)

One day many years ago, Robert's sister, Doreen, came down on the train from Centralia, Washington to visit us. Back then we only saw each other a couple of times a year, so as Robert watched her step off the train, he stopped in his tracks. "How come I didn't know about this?!" he was thinking.... You see, cradled in Doreen's arms there was a large bundle, carefully swaddled in a baby blanket. Then, as Robert and Doreen walked toward each other, a big grin began to spread across her face, and once they were finally standing next to each other, she lifted the blanket to unveil...the biggest zucchini Robert had ever seen!... I'm happy to report that the bouncing baby zucchini met an appropriate fate: It was sliced and diced and stirred into batter that become many loaves of zucchini bread. After all, even giant zucchini is tasty when you mix it with cinnamon and nutmeg and sugar!... In addition to multiplying the loaves of zucchini bread and filling our freezer with gifts to share, we also harvested a funny story that lives on in family lore and still elicits lots of laughter at gatherings, "Remember that time Doreen pranked Robert?..."

I was reminded of Doreen's prank as I was preparing to preach on today's reading from Mark 4. In a commentary on this passage, Dr. Clif Black of Princeton Seminary observes that certain aspects of the two parables Jesus tells here are humorous or even borderline ridiculous. For example, in contrast to Matthew's and Luke's gospels, where the mustard seed grows up and becomes a tree that provides shelter for birds, in Mark's version of the story, Jesus turns our expectations upside down by declaring that the miniscule mustard seed will grow up to become, as our translation puts it, "the greatest of all shrubs." But as I mentioned in my MailChimp email commentary yesterday, "shrub" isn't an accurate translation of the Greek word "lathanon," which means "garden herb" or "vegetable." So, when Jesus spoke this parable back in the day, his original audience would've heard this: "The kingdom of God 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 garden herbs" or "the greatest of all vegetables"—take your pick!...<sup>1</sup> In other words, Jesus compares the kingdom of God to the smallest seed that grows up to be the greatest of—you guessed it!—zucchini! Without being disrespectful, that's hilarious, and it also gives us much food for thought!<sup>2</sup>

So, I'm going to ask you to hold that food for thought carefully—perhaps swaddling it like a precious zucchini!—while I take us on a slight detour back to first parable Jesus tells in today's gospel reading. Here we encounter a quirky little parable that's unique to Mark's gospel. But before we try to unpack this short, but dense teaching, I want to tell you about two conversations I've had within the last ten days. The first was with Oregon Synod Bishop Laurie Larson Caesar on

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Mark 4:31-32.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. C. Clifton Black, "Commentary on Mark 4:26-34," [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), 16 June 2024.

Friday, June 7<sup>th</sup>. After reading my annual pastor's report, Bishop Laurie had asked me to set up a Zoom call with her, and our meeting happened to fall on the 26<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament. I mention this because the anniversary put me in a reflective mood, where I was thinking about ministry and life as a whole. Anyway, Bishop Laurie wanted to know how she might be of support to us here at Zoar, so I shared with her what a wonderfully caring, servant-hearted community we have here at Zoar. Then I told her about some of the cool things that are happening here at Zoar: For example, I told her about our step-by-step process toward building an inclusive church where all people belong, and I told her about Zoar's Strategic Task Force beginning its work of helping our congregation discern the Holy Spirit's guidance toward sustainable directions for future mission and ministry in and with our wider community. I also told her that our congregation is well aware that the time to discern new directions for the future is now--that is, while we're in a position of relative strength. Then I commented, "Of course, some of the things we're contemplating are longer term, which means that some of us may not get to see them bear fruit." Bishop Laurie nodded and said, "Yes. That's how it is for all of us in the church. We get to participate in God's work by planting seeds, but we don't always get to see the fruits of our labor...." The second conversation took place over lunch this past Wednesday, when I met up with my colleague, Pastor Craig Johnson from Christ Lutheran Church in Aurora. One of the threads woven throughout our conversation was the reality of our own "limited bandwidth." You see, since COVID, we clergy, like people in other caring professions, have come to see our own finitude more clearly than ever before. Many of us are exhausted, and we're realizing that when it comes to the work of ministry, we just can't "do it all," so we've had to reassess and pull back from some things we've done in the past—including enjoyable things like spending time with our colleagues.

So, in my growing awareness of my own limitations, I truly appreciate Jesus' reminder that even though his disciples are called and empowered to work for the reign of God, ultimately, we're not in charge of its growth. Taking a closer look at the first parable Jesus tells, we see that someone scatters seed, but then that very same sower leaves the seed to germinate on its own, while he sleeps and rises to go about other tasks. It's while he's going about his daily routine that the seed sprouts and grows, and Jesus tells us he doesn't have a clue as to how or why; only God knows. (Side note: As an accidental gardener, I find a lot of hope in this!) Indeed, it seems that all the while, deep down in the dark womb of the earth, the Creator has been working a miracle, bringing forth new and abundant life from small, dead-looking seeds. And it's only after the life-giving grain has ripened that the sower is called back into the picture to become the harvester of the crop that will nourish and sustain God's people.... When you stop and think about it, this is a consistent theme throughout the gospels, where Jesus teaches that God provides an abundant harvest to nourish both body and soul—if only you and I are ready to receive and to share. To say it another way: In the kingdom of God, there's always more than enough of every good gift to go around—grace upon grace!<sup>3</sup>

I'm curious: I wonder how many of you react like me—that is, with relief and appreciation—when you hear Jesus' reminder that we're not in charge. [show of hands!...] Yeah,

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. John 1;16.

I figured you'd understand!... Again, as someone who tends to get caught up in the exhausting and never-ending spin-cycle of trying to micromanage "all the things," it's a relief to hear Jesus say, "You don't have to be in charge of everything! In fact, you aren't!.. After you've planted and watered the seeds entrusted to you, it's okay to go do other things, and it's okay to sleep! You've done your part, and now your job is to give thanks to God, trusting that God will take your small efforts, multiply them, and help them bear fruit....And if the seeds you've planted don't bear fruit—which they sometimes won't—then ask God to help you learn from that experience. Perhaps it isn't the right time or place for those particular seeds to grow. It may be that God is focused on bringing forth a different kind of growth in another place—a growth you can't yet see in a place that's beyond your vision...."

But wait...there's more! That first little parable Jesus tells in today's gospel reading also reminds us that sometimes the seeds you and I have sown only bear fruit much, much later. This can be hard for us to understand because in our high-speed, fast-food, me-first society, we've become addicted to instant gratification, and so, we tend to think our work has failed if we don't see immediate, measurable results. News flash: That's NOT how the kingdom of God works! God's time is not our time, and God's ways are not our ways, as the prophet Isaiah reminds us,

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.  
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts."<sup>4</sup>

At any given moment, beneath the surface and beyond the scope of our finite human vision, the mysterious power of our Creator is patiently working, bringing forth first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. Indeed, the saying is true: "It takes as long as it takes...." In fact, sometimes it takes years before you and I can see the growth--if we ever do! For example, when I was in seminary, I tried to start a parenting group at my teaching parish, St. Paul Lutheran Church in Oakland, California. We invited some speakers from the wider community, and a handful of people attended a few times. But as the months went on, attendance tapered off, and when I moved back to Oregon a year later, I was sure the group had disbanded. Fast forward several years to the Sunday I greeted an out-of-town visitor at the doorway of St. James Lutheran Church in downtown Portland. Her name was Karen Ball, and I knew her from my time at from St. Paul. As she hugged me, Karen said, "You know that parenting class you started at St. Paul? It's really taken off." And I went, "Huh??... Wait. I don't understand. I thought that fizzled out...." Karen chuckled, "Nope. It took a while to get going, but after you left, someone else took over, and it took off!..." Looking back, I can't help grinning about this and thinking, "Okay, Holy Spirit. Lesson learned: It's NOT about me!..." In fact, I have to say that's not the only time I've experienced the Spirit patiently taking what I presumed were wasted seeds and causing them to grow much later into something unexpected and amazing—a great zucchini, if you will... All kidding aside, I'm humbled by and grateful for these small glimpses of the kingdom of God!

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<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 55:8-9.

My friends, Jesus is clear: The kingdom of God is already at hand, and even though you and I may not be fully aware of it, God's reign of reconciliation is growing inexplicably and inexorably toward fulfillment. As hard as we human beings might try to hinder or hasten the coming of God's kingdom, ultimately, there's nothing you or I or any other human being can do to stop it or speed it up.... In the meantime, while we wait for God's reign of peace and justice to come in its fullness, you and I, together with Christians throughout the world, are called to continue Christ's mission and ministry by proclaiming and embodying the Good News of God's love for all people, which has been revealed through Jesus the Christ....

So, no matter how young or old you are, no matter what you perceive your strengths and shortcomings to be, know that God loves you deeply, and God has important work for you to do—work that aligns with the unique gifts God has entrusted to you for the sake of this world God loves so deeply. Again, your work—and mine—is to scatter the seeds of God's love and then get out of the way, trusting that God will give the growth when and where and how it's needed.... In closing, I'd like to share with you once again a poetic prayer written in 1979 by Father Ken Untener of Michigan. It's titled "Prophets of a Future Not Our Own," and it goes like this:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.  
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts; it is even beyond our vision.  
We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction  
of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.  
Nothing we do is complete,  
which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.  
No statement says all that could be said.  
No prayer fully expresses our faith.  
No confession brings perfection.  
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.  
No program accomplishes the Church's mission.  
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.  
This is what we are about.  
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.  
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.  
We lay foundations that will need further development.  
We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.  
We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.  
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.  
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an  
opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.  
We may never see the end results,  
but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.  
We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.  
We are prophets of a future not our own.