

One to Grow On
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
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Mark 4:1-34

Let your word be like a seed of heaven among us. Grant us ears to listen and hearts to attend to your word. Amen.

Recently my brother Mike bought a house in Essex, Connecticut. He lives alone, with his elderly border collie Tango. He was so excited to move away from the city where he had spent the previous 15 years. The house he chose was an old Victorian with plenty of home improvement projects to keep him busy and keep his mind off his law practice. The yard was big, with lots of trees, space for Tango to run around, and best of all – there was a perfect place in the backyard to plant a vegetable garden.

Never mind that Mike had never planted a vegetable garden before, ignorance rarely stops my brother from trying something new. He started by marking off a large square, sunny area. Then he built a tall deer-proof fence, next he roto-tilled the ground and planted corn and tomatoes and potatoes and beans. And he planted cucumbers. He could only imagine the salad choices which would literally sprout before his very own eyes!

Someone told him that in order to plant cucumbers you build up a few dirt mounds and drop some seeds in. So he did. He built up five or six little dirt mounds and because he really like cucumbers he put fifteen or twenty seeds into each mound. If you've ever planted cucumbers before you now know where this story is going.

What my brother didn't know is just how prolific cucumber plants can be under the right conditions. Within four weeks those cucumbers had taken over the entire garden. Within eight weeks the vines were everywhere, and so were the cucumbers. They had climbed over the fence and up his back steps. They had crept through into his neighbor's yard. Cucumbers were growing in the window wells of his basement. There were cucumbers everywhere! He got so irritated toward the end of the summer that he took out his lawnmower and with great sadistic pleasure ran over those cucumbers and watched them explode out of the mower's shoot.

Of course, he later discovered that was a really bad idea too. All he did was spread cucumber seeds everywhere. Every once in a while, just to make him smile, I send him a cucumber-centered recipe as an e-mail attachment (in truth, I probably laugh harder than he does!)

When I think of all the teaching stories Jesus told, the parable of the prodigal son and the Good Samaritan quickly come to mind – maybe because I can concretely understand what Jesus may have been trying to convey: Forgive others, even when they hurt you! Help those in need, even if it requires some sacrifice! Love people! These are things I can do.

But when it comes to the three seed parables we've heard today, I struggle a little bit more. All three: the Sower (Mark 4:1-9) the Growing Seed (Mark 4:26-29) and the Mustard Seed (Mark 4:30-32) seem to suggest that all I need to do is trust in the Grower and wait for something to happen. For me, that's not really quite active enough.

As Jesus told the story, a farmer put a heavy seed bag on his shoulder and went out to his field to sow seed. In the first century, farmers didn't use fences. So between growing seasons, when fields lay fallow, foot travelers would cut walking paths through the fields, taking the shortest distance between two points. So, naturally, some of that seed the farmer threw landed on the hard path. And when it did, the birds quickly enjoyed their lunch.

Other seeds fell on rocky ground and because there was little soil, the seedlings sprang up quickly and then withered under the scorching sun. Thorns choked off other seeds, denying them the light of day and the promise of their bounty. Finally, some seed fell on good ground and brought forth a bumper crop yielding way more than was expected – just like the cucumbers in my brother's back yard.

Jesus ends the story admonishing all who heard it to listen; carefully, deeply, thoughtfully. Listen!

Some time passes. Later in the day, probably alone with his disciples, Jesus gave them an interpretation that has endured through the ages. He doesn't normally do that, at least in the gospels we read. As with all of Jesus' teaching stories, the key is to listen and let the word take root in us.

Each one of us, from little baby Joseph who we baptized today, to our most seasoned elders, have led lives in which we have experienced periods of discomfort and growth. Our lives have had worn-out, rocky, thorny, and yes, even good seasons in which we feel tremendous life-affirming grace.

If your life is anything like mine, you know how daily living creates well-worn paths. We call them ruts. We travel to and from work using the same route day after day. We shop at the same grocery store, we fill our tanks at the same convenience store, (thankfully) we attend the same church, and, more times than not, feed our families predictable menus of foods we know we can prepare and they will eat and enjoy.

Routines bring us a sense of stability.

But sometimes in our relationship with God, routines can become ruts. We can attend church week after week, hear the scriptures read (like this familiar parable), sing familiar songs, go through the worship routine, and leave feeling like we have done our duty as Good Christians until next Sunday at 10am. In so doing, we give the good seed God sows to the birds of indifference. Trust me. It happens and may be happening even now.

Truth be told, God's seed also falls on the rocky places in our lives. Life can sometimes leave us cold, sharp and rough. Pain, grief and loss, emotional or physical abuse, the cruelty of insensitive friends, and the crude comments of strangers can make us feel lifeless and unmoved, hard things void of God's bounty.

Thorns pop up in our lives as well. Our boss yells at us, or our spouse doesn't understand us, our parents berate us for what we think is no good reason. Even the most emotionally well balanced person can feel overwhelmed by another's cutting brutality. The thorns choke out God's blessings, and rob us of God's promise.

Thankfully, though, some seed does fall on good ground. When it does, the miracle of germination, cultivation, nourishment, sunshine, rain and loving care yield a generous harvest no one thought was possible. It happens in all our lives in ways that leave us speechless. Look back and see all the times God sowed good seed on the good ground of your soul, and how from that small beginning came a generous harvest that still leaves you amazed.

And here is the needed twist in this old, old story. Yes, there will always be people in our lives who are worn out and jaded, hard and rocky, and yes, even good. But the gospel reminds us there is far more potential in each of us than any of us can even imagine. More places for God's grace to grow and take root than we may ever know.

Hearing that we have so much potential can be difficult to swallow, especially when we consider all the broken places in our world: war, terrorism, disease, violence, hunger, despair. So much pain, and so little we can do to impact the bad things which go on all around us.

Maybe that's why Jesus told another story... one about a tiny Mustard Seed. *(Just as an aside, how cool is it that we're considering this story as Peggy's grandson is baptized today? Thank you, narrative lectionary!)*

From a really tiny seed grows a tremendously invasive plant. One with roots that keeps the soil from washing away and with branches that provide a home for living creatures. It can even produce more seeds, which can be used to help pickle all my brother's cucumbers!

What I hear in the text today is that all manner of ground exists in the fields that are our lives. If, as disciples, we clear out the rocks, cut down the thorns, change up the routines, we just may give the gospel more opportunities to grow.

We have challenges to face, yes. Some of them are truly daunting. But no matter what we are personally dealing with in the moment, we also have the power of loving God walking every step of the way with us. As the apostle Paul wrote "*For I am confident that neither life, nor death, nor principalities, nor powers, nor any other created thing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus*"¹

And even when you aren't sure you have that teeny tiny mustard seed faith, remember, it can begin pretty small. You may not always be sure about the future, but the Grower is there. You have within you good soil. And you are loved. And that is more powerful than any government or law or nation or conflict, inside or out, that you may ever face.

Do not be discouraged, tiny ones, but live as the generous, bountiful, giving people Christ called you to be. Amen.

¹ Romans 8:38