

**Romans 8:12-25**

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

**Matthew 13: 31-33**

He put before them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32it is the smallest of all the seeds, but 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.’

He told them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.’

## Plenty of Good Seed

As I was sitting down to compose this sermon, I wanted to portray how well a mustard seed symbolizes God's promise to grow his kingdom inside of us no matter what. This is no small promise, since the words "God's kingdom" represent the full extent of beauty that a human life can be.

At that point in writing a sermon, it's really easy for me to get distracted from the real work, which is like bathing in the spirit while sharpening your pencil. It's a fantastic place to be, but not necessarily *comfortable*. So I think of lots of other things to do, like getting the facts on mustard seeds.

I wanted something *really big*. Something *concrete*. I was thinking about the extravagance of plants producing—from one seed—a whole bunch of new seeds. This is something it's easy to take for granted, but it's one of those everyday miracles that's really amazing when you think about it for a minute. Why not just a *few* seeds from each plant? If I were the creator of the universe I'd probably give humanity a dozen seeds per plant if they were lucky.

So I wanted to know how many seeds a mustard plant produces from a single seed. I was looking for the "Wow" factor. And in these days of the Internet, as you know, it's possible to look for this sort of thing. Right in the moment it *occurs* to you, in the comfort of your own *home*, and you think to yourself it probably won't even take long, which is a factor when you're the parent of teenagers and you're writing a sermon...

Well I was lucky. I actually turned up some facts and it only took an hour. It could have been a lot worse... Thank you [God]. And so, even though quantitative measures will

never convey the sublime... and you're not paying me by the hour for this... here are the facts.

According to the World Journal of Agricultural Sciences, a mustard plant produces an average of 30 grams of seed per plant. I quickly realized that's only a little over an ounce.

Well, *that* was no example of God's abundance. So I started looking for the weight of a single mustard seed in case an ounce is actually a large number of seeds. Thanks to Askville-Dot-Amazon-Dot-Com, I got what I was looking for.

It turns out a mustard seed weighs two one-thousandths of a gram. The resulting calculations? A single mustard plant produces about 15,000 seeds. I had my "Wow" factor. Then I remembered seeing a yield per acre on another site.... Luckily, I found it quickly. According to North Dakota State University, a conservative per-acre yield of mustard plants is 1,300 pounds of seed. That's 291 million seeds per acre.

Okay... the facts are silly and not at all poetic, but they confirm the point of the parable. When God's abundance is measured quantitatively, the numbers are *really really big*.

Jesus is telling us that the seed for growing God's kingdom inside of us is radically abundant. We are supplied by God with everything we need—and more—in order to grow into just what we're supposed to be.

So what's our part in this? I mean, it's critical to remember that we can count on God to provide the seed that we need, but what's our role in the story? What's our side of the bargain?

Our part begins with remembering that—like any farmer or gardener—we can influence but not control. We are like mountain farmers who build terraces to make level ground. We can try to make strengthen the growing by cultivating, but really we are just

cooperating with a process that goes on whether or not we get on our knees and work in the garden.

What kind of cultivating do you find effective? Prayer? Meditation? A walk in the woods or stopping to marvel at a beautiful sunset? There are lots of tools and ways to work the soil, and yes, the more we participate, the stronger the growth. But God made us so the growth of our spirit happens whether or not we are good gardeners. Sometimes we grow in spite of our lack of attention to the gardening. That's where forgiveness comes in.

But we get ahead of ourselves, because we're already doing the gardening, and so often when we struggle most in life, we're nowhere near the garden. Perhaps we have forgotten that the garden exists at all.

Our real work is simply to remember the garden. To return to that place where we know that God's abundance is beyond our wildest imaginings. To remember that even when we have no clue about what's going on, there is help available. To remember that when we can't figure out what we need to do, that there is One who will point us in the right direction if only we will seek Her. To remember that when we seek, we find. I say "remember" because we all have had the experience of trying really really hard to get it right, only to find that what works is letting go and letting God. This remembering is true faith... the knowledge of what is true in our experience.

This is very similar to what we talked about two weeks ago in contemplating the Parable of the Sower. That parable is about another critical part of the growing process: the ground onto which the seed falls. We said that although we all have within us the hard ground and rocks and thorns pictured in that parable, we all have plenty of good soil within us, too, and we will find it if we look for it. We said that this sometimes means ignoring our minds when they tell us we don't have soil as worthy as other people's... we're too hard, or too sad, or too slow. We said the key is to remember that God made us all the same and we

don't have the power to change that. We said that remembering our place—that there's good soil inside of us too—that this is true humility.

So now we have covered two parts of the process of growing God's kingdom. We have remembered our faith that the seed of God's grace is extravagantly plentiful, and we have remembered the humility that we're no better or worse than anyone else—there's good soil inside us for the growing. Now let's move on to the growing process itself.

+ + +

Talk about your everyday miracles. The growth of a plant from a seed is one of those astounding miracles of life that's so common we rarely even notice it. We don't even question our trust that when we plant a seed under minimally-needed conditions, it will grow. Just like we know that the sun will rise in the morning. We don't understand *how*, it just happens, *without fail*.

So it is with the seed of God's kingdom inside us. It sprouts. The roots dig down. The stem breaks the ground and unfolds into the light and the air. With a little tending, it grows into the plant it was always meant to be. *Without fail*.

Our spirits grow in the image of God because that's how we're created. We have some influence over the conditions and the cultivating, perhaps, but we can't control the *inevitability of growth*.

It actually takes more work to stop a seed from growing than it takes to cultivate it. Just ask any gardener trying to keep their garden free of weeds. To stop a seed from growing you have to deny a basic condition necessary to growth, like air or water or light.

So it is with people. It takes more work to stunt the growth of our spirit than it does to help it grow. To stunt the growth of our spirits, we have to deny one of the basic conditions necessary to growth, like the air of freedom to understand God in our own way, or the food of holy tradition, or the water of prayer and meditation.

To extend the image one final step into another aspect of our spiritual natures—our relationships with others— in order to reap the rewards of love and acceptance, we need only *cooperate* with God’s grace. It is easier to be generous than stingy, easier to be forgiving than resentful, more fun to give than to receive.

Whatever kind of growth we’re talking about—whether about our spirits or our relationships or any other aspect of life—our cooperation is helpful but not necessary. We can influence the growth but we can’t control it. We can stunt it but we can’t destroy it.

In the end, God really is the creator, and we really are the created ones. The best we can do is to recognize this, just as Jesus taught us. God is the parent who loves Her children. God is the parent whose substance we share, in whose likeness we inevitably grow, whose kingdom *can* come to earth—within each of us—as it is in heaven.

I came across a wonderful image of God’s growing within us when I was doing that Internet research on mustard. It’s from a website dedicated to cooking and to the miracle of the growing food for the cooking, in this case mustard. It was written by a woman named Linda Gilbert:

“Every spring a minor miracle happens in the valleys and meadows of Northern California where I live. It starts off slowly during the bleakest part of winter when the sky is grey with seemingly endless rain. Trees and bushes are all bare and dormant, waiting for more welcoming conditions before blooming. Then the miracle happens -- the wild mustard appears.

“At first there is just a stem or two in a whole field of green, but even this is so bright and golden that it practically shouts. Then it seems that overnight the entire valley is blanketed in mustard's sunny glow. As far as the eye can see, fields have turned into lakes of molten yellow.

“It is especially dramatic in the vineyards that blanket this region. Huge expanses of dark, gnarled dormant vines, in tidy rows, are separated by softly swaying pale green stems topped by vivid yellow mustard flowers. It is breathtaking.”

It is breathtaking, too—if we have but the eyes to see it—to gaze on the beauty of God’s kingdom flowering in each of us here today, in the field of this congregation this morning.

We are all children of God, all beautiful, all growing more beautiful all the time, whether we remember the watering or not.

May it be so for each and every one of us.

Amen.