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The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 6), Year B  
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Mark 4:26-34  
Grace Episcopal Church, Alexandria, VA

*“Jesus said, ‘The kingdom of God...is like a mustard seed...it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs.’”*

In the name of God: + Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The wonder and imagination of a child is a beautiful thing to behold. Their world often seems to be animated by an excitement and a creativity that goes unnoticed by adults. The simplest objects can be used to create the most exciting things. A few pillows and blankets can quickly become an entrance into a world of enchantment and discovery. Somewhere along our paths of development toward adulthood we begin to see more clearly the brokenness, fragility, and complexity of this world, and we lose that wonder. Out of a fear of appearing juvenile and immature we don't allow ourselves to engage what was once so nature. Yet, we are reminded of Jesus' admonition, 'unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 18:3).

Jesus offers this advice because he knows children easily grasp the mystery and wonder of God while adults often struggle and resist it. The children's formation program called *Godly Play*, which is used here at Grace, beautifully engages the sense of wonder that comes naturally to children. The *Godly Play* method is especially effective when examining parables. Each parable is represented by a gold box, inside of which are found the characters and props needed to tell that particular story. When the children have gathered the adult story-teller places the box in the midst of the group and asks, 'I wonder what this could be.' The children are invited to offer their thoughts aloud together. They are reminded that parables are like presents; they are

gifts that have been given to us. Like a box, a parable can sometimes be difficult to open. But we just keep trying. We come back again and again to see what we can find.

The story-teller then shares the parable, and along the way the children are invited to wonder. What might this story mean? What might this particular element of the story mean? The *Godly Play* method seeks to tap into the innate sense of God's presence that children, and yes even adults, have. Though *Godly Play* is certainly a different method than traditional Sunday School, when we look at the Scriptures we can see that this method mirrors the way in which Jesus taught. Jesus teaches primarily through story and parables. A parable is literally something thrown beside something else. It is, in other words, a comparison. Jesus usually employs parables to compare a heavenly thing with an earthly thing. By their nature, parables contain many layers. As the story-teller in *Godly Play* reminds the children, parables can sometimes be difficult to open, but we keep returning to them to see what we might find. Today I invite you to join me and wonder what we might find in the parables contained in today's gospel passage.

The passage begins with Jesus addressing a large crowd and telling them two parables. Though parables are undeniably one of the main ways in which Jesus teaches, there are few parables found in Mark's gospel in comparison to Matthew and Luke. Some of the most beloved parables such as the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, and the Rich Man and Lazarus are not found in Mark, the shortest of the four canonical gospels. The two parables we hear today are among the few found in Mark, and both of them speak about 'the kingdom of God.' Jesus doesn't define this term, for it is something too layered and mysterious to fit into a simple one-sentence dictionary definition. Instead, Jesus invites us into these parables.

Jesus begins by saying the kingdom of God is as if a sower would go out and scatter seeds on the ground. The sower comes and goes, sleeping and rising, and somehow the seed

sprouts and grows. They don't know how, but it does. The earth produces of itself, and the seed grows, first the stalk, then the head, and finally the full grain in the head. When this grain is finally ripe, the sower goes at once to harvest the crop for they know it is ready. I wonder what this story could mean.

I am wondering about the sower's surprise. The seeds grow, but the sower doesn't know how. They grow even though it seems the sower has not attended to them. Like the seed scattered on the ground, the kingdom of God is growing even though we may not know how. This kingdom, God's kingdom, is not something we can bring about through our own efforts. It is God who will ultimately bring to completion this kingdom that will have no end. This is not to say, of course, that we as Christians are given a free pass to sit by idly. The gospel message is clear that as Christians we will need to take up our own cross and follow Christ. At the same time, we are assured that the kingdom is already breaking through. Immediately after his baptism in the opening sections of Mark's gospel, Jesus proclaims to the people 'the kingdom of God has come near' (1:15). It is indeed come near, yet at the same time it is not fully here. We know that all too well. There is much sin and brokenness. We live in the tension of the already and the not-yet, the surprise of watching the seeds grow, even though we know not how.

Jesus then offers a second parable, again seeking to offer us a glimpse of this mystery of the kingdom of God. 'To what can I compare the kingdom of God?' Jesus asks. It is like a mustard seed. When placed in the soil to grow, it is the smallest of seeds. It is so small you can hardly see it. It is so small that even I placed it on the tip of my finger it would still be hard to see it. That seed is placed in the ground and covered with soil, and to be honest, it would logical to think that this tiny little seed wouldn't lead to much of anything. Yet, this tiny seed when it is sown grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs. And not only does it become the greatest

of all, but it also puts forth branches and provides shelter and shade for the birds of the air. The kingdom of God is like that. I wonder what this story could mean.

Again, I am wondering about the surprise that emerges in this story. Our expectations are turned on their head and we catch a glimpse of that surprising mystery called the kingdom of God. The smallest of things grows to become great, and not only that but it also comes to provide protection and nourishment for others. We are promised that our efforts which might seem to be so feeble and inconsequential have the ability to grow and flourish to something we could never imagine, and in that we can find a sense of abiding hope.

We are daily confronted with stories of tragedy, death, and disaster. We hear of school shootings, suicide, war, refugees fleeing violence, children forcibly separated from their parents the list goes on and on. I'm not sure about you, but sometimes the cumulative effect becomes too much and I have to simply shut it off. I can't pay attention anymore. I just ignore the news. Out of sight, out of mind. It's not my problem to deal with, I tell myself. What could I do to make anything better, anyway? The issues are too big and systemic for any one person to do anything about, I say. It often seems best to just let the scattered seeds keep growing and let God accomplish in God's good time what God will accomplish.

Today's gospel passage teaches us that this way of thinking is fundamentally flawed. The parable of the mustard seed teaches us that all of our acts, no matter how small, can grow to become something greater than we ever imagined. Examples from our own lives abound. Take for example this parish's food pantry. A few parishioners dreamed that this parish might become a place that could offer food to the hungry. They followed that push of the Spirit, and now decades later the food pantry continues to provide food for hundreds of families every year. A small idea has grown into something that provides food and hospitality for so many. The

examples need not be as grand as that of starting a new ministry like the food pantry. Never discount or disregard the value of a kind greeting or a simple smile to a stranger. Never discount the impact a gesture of kindness can have on someone who may feel and know only the grip of darkness that seems to permeate our world. I have lived in urban areas for the past several years and frequently encounter individuals who ask for money. In truth, I am a true millennial and almost never have cash, but my heart always breaks a little each time I encounter someone and don't give them anything. In talking with a spiritually wise person about this she recommended I stop and have a conversation with the person. Ask them their name. Listen to their story. I might not be able to give them any material resources, but stopping to actually see someone and acknowledge their dignity and worth as a child of God has the ability to do more than I could ever understand. The smallest of seeds can grow to become something so much bigger.

Today's parables invite us to wonder with Jesus as we consider the kingdom of God. I've offered my own wonderings at the surprises and abiding hope contained in these parables. I hope you will keep wondering yourselves, for as *Godly Play* teaches us, parables are sometimes hard to open and there is always something to find when we come back to them. Above all friends, I pray that you will continue to dwell deeply in the place between the already here and the not-yet that characterizes the kingdom of God. Go out into the world and be transmitters of God's love into our hurting world, trusting that God will work through our small acts to accomplish infinitely more than we could ever ask or imagine. Glory be to our God, who is + Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.