

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

## GROWING UP

### *Sermon for Pentecost 3B—Mk 4:26-34*

LPC, 6/14/15

There are some things you really can't stop from growing, not for good: kudzu, dust bunnies, hair that sprouts where you don't want it. All of those things are unpleasant, but there is one thing that you can't stop from growing that *is* good, incredibly good, and that is the kingdom of God. It is the nature of the kingdom of God to grow, and grow rampant. It is God's plan that God's kingdom, in God's good time, embrace the cosmos. And God will not fail in this.

Some may hear that and think, "So why are so many churches shrinking?" The answer to that question is obvious, but so difficult for us church people to see that we may hide from it. The reason churches fail when it's the nature of God's kingdom to grow is that churches are not the kingdom of God, not exactly anyway. Churches are mixed creatures, born of both God and man.

Insofar as the church is God's creature, it is the body of Christ, the holy company of all faithful people, sustained by the Holy Spirit, the kingdom of God on earth. But the church as we know it is also a human institution, staffed and managed by human beings, in all their decadence and glory. And the nature of human institutions is not growth, but self-preservation.

A lot of the fixes that have been proposed for growing the church come from the impulse to preserve the institution. Some of these fixes work, at least for a time, but in my opinion they work only insofar as their imperatives coincide closely and identifiably with those of the kingdom of God.

Personally, I believe that concentration on preserving the church is misplaced. I believe a more proper emphasis is on building the kingdom of God. Based on biblical testimony and the experience of faith communities that do flourish, the kingdom of God practically grows itself, we know not how, if we place ourselves at its service. In other words, concentrate on building the kingdom of God and the church will take care of itself.

Now if you stand next to me long enough, you will hear what I think the kingdom of God is. God came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ to demonstrate the kingdom of God. And what did Jesus do? He healed. He listened. He forgave. He fed. He freed. He loved. He regularly withdrew to pray. He was generous with his time and attention to people who needed him. He allowed himself to be moved by kingdom of God behavior in other people, as we see from Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician woman, who persuaded Jesus to help her when he was initially disinclined.

Here's another thing Jesus did: he never seemed to miss an opportunity to teach about the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is like sowing seed and harvesting. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. The kingdom of God is like a lost coin. The

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kingdom of God is like a flock of sheep. One gets the impression that as Jesus travelled around with his disciples and as common things hove into view, Jesus would say, “See that? The kingdom of God is like that!” and then explain how and why. Jesus was always seeing the kingdom of God in the world around him. And, he was able to do this without being blind to the evil in the world.

Now let’s take a closer look at this mustard seed analogy. What we on this continent think of as mustard is a brassica, a member of the same family as broccoli and cauliflower. Brassica mustard seeds are indeed tiny, as you know if you’ve ever sown them in your garden or used them in cooking. But they will not grow into great shrubs.

What Jesus knew as mustard was probably an evergreen shrub known as *Salvadora persica*. Let me read to you what I found out about it on the internet.

*Mustard bush evolved to grow in hot, arid regions. Sometimes called toothbrush tree, mustard bush (Salvadora persica) is an evergreen shrub species grown in Africa, India and the Middle East. It has limited ornamental value, but is sometimes used as a land reclamation or wind-shelter plant in areas with saline or alkaline soil. The mature size of a mustard bush depends on its environment, but most will reach a similar size despite a naturally slow growth rate. Mustard bushes reach an average mature height of between 6 and 20 feet with a 20-foot spread, although exceptional plants can reach 30 feet tall under ideal conditions. They have a spreading, multi-stemmed growth habit with a drooping or weeping branch structure.*

When you know this, Jesus’ analogy about mustard sheltering the birds of the air makes sense. The kingdom of God is not like a towering tree of the forest. It isn’t even all that pretty, that you would use it in making your garden a showplace. But it is strong, it is resilient. It grows, slowly perhaps, but inexorably, and under conditions which other plants find forbidding. And it provides a home for those who then travel far and wide and take its culture elsewhere.

What is our take-away from this? As baptized persons, as followers of Jesus, *we must be about kingdom building*. If we build the kingdom, the church will take care of itself. And we build the kingdom by healing, listening, forgiving, freeing, loving, being generous with our money, time and attention; by withdrawing to pray, and by allowing ourselves to be moved by kingdom of God behavior in others.

We can start by seeking and seeing, as Jesus did, the kingdom of God in the world around us, without being blind to what is bad.

See this? The kingdom of God is like this. The kingdom of God is like a group of people who come together in common purpose to hear the word of God, and share a common meal, and go out in joy to serve God in the world. The kingdom of God is like ... us. Let us be more like the kingdom of God.