

Jesus's teaching in the gospels often drew on imagery from the natural world. We see that in the gospel reading for today, where Jesus is talking about seeds. In fact, this is the third parable about seeds in that chapter, Mark, Chapter 4. One of the parables that proceeds it is the famous story of a sower sowing the different seeds that fall in different kinds of soil. In this season of creation, we're going to follow Jesus's example and look at various things in the natural world over the next few weeks, seeds today, rock next week, water the week after. We'll see that these are rich themes to explore with a depth and meaning of significance as much to us as to Jesus's original hearers.

I limit myself today just to three things about seeds. The first thing about seeds is that they speak of growth. That's the point that Jesus is bringing home by talking about the mustard seed, which was familiar to his hearers, as a tiny seed. It grows into a very large shrub. The whole point of seeds is that if they're put in the right conditions, they don't remain a seed. They become something else. They grow. My daughter, Miriam, is very tall. She always has been. She came out long and she kept on growing. She used to get very upset when we used to meet relatives who we hadn't seen for a long time, who would invariably greet her by saying something like, "Oh my, you've grown." Miriam was always very polite, but she used to entertain herself by thinking of snarky responses that she could say next time somebody said that to her. Something like, "Oh, I hadn't noticed. Thank you for telling me," or "What did you expect? Did you think I'd be shrinking?" Of course, Miriam kept on growing. That's the nature of things in the natural world. They grow and develop and change.

Growth, change, and transformation are part of God's order of creation. But strangely, we often seem to prefer that things would stay the same, especially in church life. St. Paul speaks of the church in 1 Corinthians as God's field. I don't think he has in mind a nice field, freshly tilled with nothing in. I think he's conjuring up there an image of a field that's planted, that grows, and that looks towards the harvest. As we gather on this Rally

Sunday, we're looking forward, and we can be excited about the future that God has for us here at St. James. We're slowly emerging from the pandemic, and our aim isn't that everything goes back to exactly how it was before. We're looking to grow. There are lessons that we've learned in the pandemic. We've made some changes to our schedule. We want to involve more families in our worship, and we want to continue to develop our adult education, which is happening from today on. It's hybrid, so if you're watching online, you could join in with us.

It's important to us that we continue to invest here because it's a vital part of the process of spiritual growth. Our faith shouldn't be staying the same. We aim to nurture the seed of faith that God has planted in each one of us doing all we can to promote growth and development. The natural order of God's creation is change, and it's in that context, I want to just say something briefly about death. We've all been made to think about death a lot more in this pandemic with all the news channels constantly bombarding us with the numbers of how many people have died with COVID as if they're keeping score of a baseball game or something.

One of the things that comes across strongly to me during this time is how the medical profession seemed to talk about death as if it's an avoidable failure. The reality is that we all die. Death is part of the change that comes with the natural order. But for us people of faith, it is not the end. Death is our enemy, but it is a vanquished foe. We are a resurrection people. Our hope is grounded on Jesus, who rose again from the dead, and we share in that victory. Jesus uses the image of a seed to make this point. He says in the gospel of John, "Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit." Death for us is not the end. It's simply a part, a natural part of God's ever-changing world. It's what needs to happen if we're truly to flourish.

The second aspect of Jesus's teaching about seeds is that it's an encouragement to appreciate the small things in life, small things like a mustard seed. This is a lesson that should come easily to us because we belong to a tradition that started with a baby being born in an outhouse, in a far-flung corner of the Roman Empire. How often we fail to notice that the God who works in small things is at work around us, or we fail to appreciate the difference that we can make with our small, apparently small actions and words. Do you know that the first step in constructing the bridge over Niagara Falls was in 1846 where a young man aged 15 called Homan Walsh was flying his kite? He flew it to the other side of the gorge where one of his mates collected it and tied a bigger piece of string than the kite string to the end of the kite, and they flew it back. The process carried on, replacing the string with a stronger string, and eventually it became a chord.

Then the expanse was crossed with steel, enough to support workers and tools and materials. Eventually a bridge was built, along which everything and everyone can pass, but it started with Homer, and his kite, and a small piece of string. Small things make a difference. They can have a big impact. That's true of our words. The brother of Karen Carpenter, the singer who died of anorexia, said that when his sister was young, someone referred to her as Richard's chubby little sister. He said she never got over that. It gnawed away at her, destroying her self-esteem and eventually her whole body. Of course, whoever said that had no idea that a throw away phrase would have such an impact. The opposite can be true as well. The words we say can have a positive, big impact for good.

Do you know, in a recent survey, it was discovered that 86% of people who come to Christian faith say that they come to faith because of something a friend of theirs said to them, something somebody thought of as just a casual conversation. We should always be prepared to talk about Jesus, to give account of the faith which is within us because that

can have a big impact, turning people's lives around, being part of the story of faith.

The final thing I draw out here about what Jesus says about seeds is that seeds are a good example of the interconnectedness of all of God's creation. Seeds need to be looked after if they're to give of their best. In the parable of the sower, which as I've said proceeds this little parable. The sower sows the seeds, and some of the seed falls on rocky ground, and nothing comes to it. Some of the seed falls on freshly tilled ground, fertile ground, and it grows. For God's creation to flourish, all God's creatures and creations need to work together. God provides the seeds, the sun, the water. The farmer tills the ground and brings the harvest. The farmer knows that he can't exhaust the soil and drain it of all nutrients, that it has to be left fallow from time to time to regain its strength and energy. That's what it means to be a good steward of God's creation.

I was struck in this parable by how it ends. It doesn't end by simply saying, and the mustard seed grew into an enormous mustard tree bush, the greatest of all the shrubs. It doesn't end there. It says, "and the shrub puts forth large branches so that the birds of the air could make rest in its shade." In other words, the mustard seed grows into a large bush and plays its part in the circle of life. It doesn't just use the resources of the soil to get as big as it possibly can. It gives back, gives shade to the birds. Humankind is learning sadly a bit slowly that we can't just take from the earth. We too must give back and play our part in sustaining the goodness and bounty of God's world. That's what it means to be a steward of God's creation.

Three lessons we can learn about seeds: (1) seeds speak of growth, (2) seeds encourage us to appreciate small things, and (3) seeds remind us of the need to be good stewards of God's creation.

Amen.