

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
Dan Krebill, Co-Pastor

June 14, 2009  
*11<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*  
Mark 4:26-34

## **Flourishing**

Every Spring there is a renewed interest in gardening. It crops up about the time those first hearty crocuses appear amidst the lingering patches of snow. Whether it be sprucing up the flowerbeds for another season or tilling that garden to prepare it for what is hoped will be a cornucopia of healthful vegetables, folks flock to the numerous garden centers to stock up on compost, bedding plants and seeds among all the other paraphernalia that one needs to garden successfully. Given the economic recession in which we find ourselves this year, there are new gardeners being added to the ranks—both those who are returning to gardening after a hiatus, as well as those who are brand new to this human endeavor that is as old as civilization itself. Even the President himself is undertaking this enterprise earlier this spring by transforming part of the White House grounds into a vegetable garden. Vegetable gardening, we're told, is more healthful. It reduces our carbon footprint since no fossil fuels are used between the back garden and the kitchen table. And it fosters a closer connection to our environment.

Gardening, cultivating the land for the production of plants, has been going on for millennia. And over those thousands of years, research and experimentation has resulted in amazing crop yields as well as in ensuring more reliably consistent plants. Places like the ag department here at MSU and others like it across the world have sought to unlock the mysteries of plant life contained within the seeds. And with the continued progress that is being made in agricultural genetic research and engineering, scientists are getting closer and closer to the origins of life itself. It's almost like they're getting a glimpse of God's creating hands!

So with our increased interest and engagement in backyard gardening, along with our locale which has us firmly ensconced in an agricultural setting, we have in common with one another, at the very least, a basic understanding of how plants grow—how the seeds, once planted, take root and grow into mature plants.

When we hear the teaching of Jesus then as we do this morning from Mark's gospel and he's talking about seeds and plants and gardens and gardeners, we're able to relate and connect to what he's saying just as well as the hearers of Jesus in his day. It's another example of the timeless character of Jesus' teaching.

The teaching here is about God's kingdom and how it is growing—out of sight, behind the scenes—in spite of no visible evidence. Just like a seed, once it is planted, germinates and takes root in the earth out of sight and behind the scenes. This talk of God's kingdom is significant for the first readers of Mark's gospel. At the time Mark was written there were two earthly kingdoms vying for power and influence. One was the mighty Roman empire or kingdom and the other was made up of the Jewish leaders who were clamoring for attention in the shadow of the mighty Roman dominance. In this context the Christian community was small and fledgling—almost out of sight of the major players of the time. So Jesus' parable of the growing seed and the parable of the mustard seed would have served to assure these early Christians that in spite of outwardly appearances to the contrary the message of Jesus that was confirmed in his death and

resurrection was indeed germinating and taking root and that like the tiny mustard seed, would eventually grow into a mighty movement that would be hard to dismiss. This surely would have been reassuring to the early Christian community that had no sense of certainty that it would survive let alone prevail.

But there is more here in this parable's imagery for us in this day and time. Even though some prognosticators are spinning tales of Christianity's doom in the coming decades—especially in the northern hemisphere where it has been in steady decline in Europe and in parts of our own country, Christianity remains one of the greatest of the world's religions across the ages.

In spite of our modern scientific advances in agronomy, there remains a mystery at the heart of each and every seed. It's the mystery to which Jesus alludes when he says, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how." (Mk. 4:26-27) When it comes right down to it, the growth of the seed happens out of our sight and out of our control. We may create and foster ideal conditions in which the seed can do its thing, but the truth is, the growth happens independent of us.

Think dandelions for minute. In our neighborhood, we've just come through that great moment in the spring when all of the first of the dandelion cycle goes to seed. In spite of our efforts last season, those pesky and tenacious dandelions have prevailed once again and have made it through the winter only to sink down roots for this new season. With all of the wet weather we've been having, it is relatively easy to pull up an entire dandelion plant with a central root as much as a foot long!

At the heart of Jesus' parables today he is speaking of God's sovereignty and of God's grace. The kingdom of God and the growth of the kingdom of God happens because of God's grace pure and simple; just as the germination and growth of the seed happen.

Jesus' message is a timeless one that has always had relevance for our human nature that leads us to believe that the success of the kingdom of God is somehow dependent on the faithfulness and efforts of God's people rather than on God alone.

It is this grace that is at the heart of Christianity. Our salvation, our redemption, our being put right with God is a gift pure and simple. It doesn't depend on our work. It doesn't depend on our effort. It doesn't depend on our attitude. It doesn't depend on our faith. It doesn't even depend on our openness to it. God's gift of grace to us is a free gift, given with no strings attached.

It's the same with the kingdom of God. The same grace of God that is sufficient for the salvation of you and of me is also more than sufficient for the flourishing of God's realm.

Now the cynic or the skeptic in our midst may be wondering just what is our motivation then to live a righteous and upright life as a child of God—a Christian. Well, at the point that it dawns on us that we are the recipients of this amazing grace of God and we fully embrace that gift, how can our response be anything but a celebration of thanksgiving and gratitude? When a person is filled with this grace, he or she becomes infectious in sharing the truth of this grace.

The same goes for a community of faith such as our congregation. A grace-filled community of faith is a gratitude filled community that seeks to celebrate and share that grace in every conceivable way.

If you have been in worship here over the last month, you will recall that we have been lifting up the emphases that emerged during our year-long Journey of Renewal. Among those emphases are the focusing on four themes to guide how we express the mission of this church over the next few years. Two of these themes have been lifted up previously: “Learning Love,” and “Sharing Faith.” Today’s focus on this amazing and incredible gift of grace lends itself beautifully to another of those themes, “Celebrating God.”

Celebrating God is what we do every time we gather for worship, whether it be here in this house of worship, or at our Rockhaven Chapel, or in a small group ministry, or in our homes. We’re thanking God as we express our gratitude to God for all that has been given to us—most centrally and importantly, the gift of grace.

A congregation that is focused on celebrating God is a congregation that is less concerned about keeping its members happy and content, and more concerned about communicating the joy we have received from God to those outside our fellowship. Such a congregation will not become side-tracked or bogged down in the bean counting (or dare I say head counting or even money counting) and defining success or failure on the results of those counts. Such a congregation will trust in God to provide the resources—material as well as spiritual—that are needed to carry God’s mission forward.

“Celebrating God!” It has a nice ring to it doesn’t it? As we live out that celebration, shared from our hearts, it will become a celebration that itself will attract the curious, the seeking and those who know the grace of God and want to find the place that outdoes itself in providing as lavish thanksgiving as is the lavish grace we’ve received.

In just a few minutes we’re going to extend our celebration today to include the sacrament of baptism for two of our youngest members. The parents of this little boy and girl have found here what they want for their children: a church that is celebrating God by learning love and sharing faith as well as serving people.

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we are humbled by the reminder today of the full extent of your grace that has been given to us by you through Jesus. Help us in our celebrating today, to do so with an infectious and contagious attitude of thanksgiving. In Jesus’ name. Amen.