

Homily for the 11th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Ezekiel 17:22-24; 2 Corinthians 5:6-10; Mark 4:26-34

In the 1970s-80s, I planted a garden in my backyard for several years. I had tomatoes and cantaloupes (sometimes watermelons), and a few other things. I didn't know much about gardening so I counted on luck and a little reading to help me along. I would have made a terrible farmer. Even now I'll go out to the flowers and say, "Come on, let's cut the bud stuff and start blooming." Farmers have to be patient. Farmers also have to recognize that they really can't do things themselves. They have to depend upon nature.

But God in designing the world also planted a garden and, since God was God, God didn't need much help. I presume God knows exactly what to do to make a garden thrive. I wish I had had that kind of confidence in my own gardening skills!

Ezekiel begins with a few words from God who talks about planting, but, because God is God, and because this is prophecy, it is probably about something else as well.

God says he is going to take a sprig from on top of a very high cedar tree and plant that sprig on the top of a very high mountain. When it grows big and tall and noble, it will be so big as to be home in the mountains for all kinds of birds. "And I can do this, because I can do anything," says God.

God is telling his people that he took one group of people out of all of creation and planted them as a special people. Jerusalem is at the top of a mountain, up from the Mediterranean. God's people were placed there so that they would grow and bear fruit – to be a beacon to others through their good deeds, love of God and neighbor. Through Ezekiel's prophecy, God is foretelling that the Jews as a chosen people will be open to everyone else after they have blossomed themselves.

So, it shouldn't be a surprise that we hear Jesus also talking today about planting and trees, even though he uses a bit of exaggeration to make his point.

Jesus uses a short series of parables about the kingdom of heaven – **the first being about a clueless gardener like me**, who throws some seeds around and then kind of waits for them to do their thing! The farmer plants the seed and goes about his routine day, day after day. Eventually the seed grows, not because the farmer does something special, but because nature took its course.

And he doesn't have to, because due to God's wisdom, the earth had the wherewithal to know how to make the seeds grow, and they do. At some point, the gardener has to realize that it is time for harvest – the seeds have grown, borne fruit and done their

thing. So the gardener goes in and reaps what God has set to grow and produce. **To the ancients every field of wheat, every flower, was a miracle of God's hand.**

To increase the kingdom of God, we have to plant the seed, we have to talk to others, to preach the Word. Then we can then leave it to God's grace given to everyone, to allow it to grow, flourish and produce fruit in another. Everything would all come in **God's good time**. It is God who will bring about growth and development. This parable is about patience and about waiting for God's harvest.

The second parable is about the mustard seed which is very tiny. You plant this very tiny seed, and surprise! – it grows into a large bush, large enough for birds to build nests in and shade themselves. The kingdom of God is just like that, Jesus says.

If we trust in God, God will give growth. It might be very subtle, nothing we can put a finger on. But after a while it suddenly occurs to us: God has brought us a long way. If we trust in God, the growth God gives us will be more than we could imagine. We are all small seeds, but God can make of us great trees. But if we think that we can do everything ourselves, and we don't trust in God, we won't get anywhere. None of us can make ourselves or others grow. **God is in charge.**

So what does this tell us about the kingdom of heaven? Well, the kingdom is a place for living, for shade, for rest. And to get there, all we have to do is plant just a little seed in people's minds and let God's grace do the rest. Jesus' preaching is so often directed at what he calls the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God...where we gradually begin to see God taking back control of everything and the world changing to a place of peace, serenity and love of God and each other. After all, God does a pretty good job with flowers, right?

We are people of the mustard seed because God's kingdom has roots, and branches, and shade. It spreads, and grows and becomes a haven and a place of shelter for those who need it, so birds from all over can "dwell in its shade."

It is a place of possibility, of hope. And it begins from something so small you might easily dismiss it, or overlook it. But that is who we are. We are people of the mustard seed. One of the many challenges we face is to nurture that seed—to be patient with it, to help it grow and to protect it.

"We are always courageous," St Paul wrote, "for we walk by faith, not by sight." Faith, not sight, guided the men and women who built this Community hoping for it to grow and blossom. Faith, not sight, has sustained the members of this community who have worshipped here as believers for the past 42 years. And faith, not sight, stirred the hearts of those who heard a carpenter tell stories of seeds and trees and birds in Galilee 2,000 years ago.

What can we do to plant a seed and of making the kingdom of heaven a reality? What in our lives has to change to make that happen? Can we find the strength to be verbal about our faith and not fear to express it in word and action – to love God and our neighbor every day, and so plant that seed which will eventually create the harvest for God’s kingdom?

What sometimes seems so unlikely...improbable or even impossible...can and does grow into something monumental.

We are people of the mustard seed...and we have been, from the beginning. We endure. We grow. We reach out to those who need shelter, and protection, and shade – offering reminders of the mercy and love of God.

And, against all odds, we prevail. That is our faith – and our hope. It is up to us to nurture and protect that seed, and see that it continues to grow. That is the Good News that we need to preach and act out in our own lives each day.

God is in charge!

Deacon Greg Cecere

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(with excerpts from Bishop Ron Stephens, Fr Joe Pellegrino, Deacon Greg Kandra)