

A little boy planted a carrot seed.
His mother said, "I'm afraid it won't come up."
His father said, "I'm afraid it won't come up."
His big brother said, "It won't come up."
But the little boy pulled up the weeds around it every day
and sprinkled the ground with water.
And then one day
a carrot came up
just as the little boy had known it would.¹

How does *your* garden grow?
Having planted/scattered seed, put in plants from a nursery. . .
have you kicked back, sleeping and rising, as vegetables, flowers
and herbs flourish, on their own?
Or, like the little boy, are you pulling weeds, sprinkling with water,
as well as contending with insects, remembering to fertilize, even mulch?

It seems that the Kingdom/realm/rule of God and our gardening (or farming) experience
are not synonymous!

Gardening, farming, are WORK. Building up the Body of Christ is WORK. The
Strawberry Festival, for all its fellowship, delights and rewards, is WORK.

This realm of God doesn't sound much like anything we know. Jesus would not make
much of a County Extension agent, for giving farm and garden pointers. What kind of
comparison is this? There must have been some head-shaking and chuckles in the crowd when
he told this story.

Kingdom sayings, parables, are not so much nice neat sayings to embroider on a sampler
and hang on the wall. They seem rather, to speak into the situation at hand. We've been away
from Mark since Easter Day, 2 months! What *is* the situation at hand?

We are in chapter 4 of the Gospel according to Mark—still early days
Jesus has called disciples, has been out and about preaching, healing, casting out demons,
with contrasting reactions:

On the one hand: Large crowds follow him, are amazed and admiring

On the other hand: Pharisees, Herodians (politicians)—already talking about "how to
destroy him" (3:6).

Some say he's out of his mind or possessed

¹Ruth Krauss, The Carrot Seed (Harper Collins, NY, NY, 1945)

Even his family are concerned; they have just come around hoping to take him home, keep him quiet and out of harm's way (3:20-22) but he says he has another family now, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother" (3:31-35).

These are the ones he's talking to here. The ones who have followed him, and have seen that not everybody comes to him, not everything goes smoothly or easily no matter how wise, splendid, powerful, compassionate he is. And, the community of Mark, for whom this Gospel was written, were having a similar experience: rejection, harsh words, persecution.

What is up with that? Why doesn't everyone see that Jesus has been sent by God, that in him the realm of God has come near? Why is there resistance and rejection, no matter how powerful the preaching and teaching, and witness of the lives of his followers?

Well, that's the mystery of it, isn't it?

Of course, after 2000 years of our human failings and mistakes as Church—recurrent self-seeking, blindness and occasional downright prejudice, cruelty and indifference instead of courage, love and compassion—it's not quite so mysterious.

But even before any of that there was anger and opposition to the presence of Jesus himself. That can be confusing; disheartening; debilitating, and raise doubts that will take the wind right out of your sails.

It goes almost without saying that in our own time there still is much resistance to the power and purposes of God. There are wars, schisms in the churches, hatred and violence between people of different religions; extreme poverty and its effects still are widespread; economies around the world are shaky. Where is this realm of God, the power and purpose of God come near in Jesus?

Do not lose heart, little children. The realm of God is as if someone should scatter seed and sleep and rise night and day and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.

At first blush, this might sound to some like an invitation to sit back and watch the show, just wait passively for the rule of God to come. It's not. And who could do that, anyway, once the burgeoning new life of Christ has taken hold? We just have to scatter seeds, tell the story, share the word. And we do, in so many ways, in our life in the world and in the church.

It all takes commitment, discipline, practice, work. Sometimes our efforts fail. Sometimes we disappoint and hurt each other. The Apostle Paul wrote to church at Corinth, "if anyone is in Christ, there is new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" That is so, and yet, our gardens, our efforts, while they may at times reflect the glory of God, are not synonymous with God's realm. Even the church at Corinth—quite

famously, the church at Corinth—had some terrible conflicts, fell far short of looking anything like new creation in Christ.

How discouraging. Were it not for this: the rule of God is unstoppable, not made to grow by us but coming forth of itself into its fullness, by God's power in God's time.

When seeds we scatter in our daily work, in our worship, music, prayer, and service sprout, take root and grow, all that is God's doing. Not in our control, any more than the weather:

“For as rain and snow fall from the heavens
and return not again, but water the earth,
Bringing forth life and giving growth,
seed for sowing and bread for eating,

So is my word that goes forth from my mouth;
it will not return to me empty;
But it will accomplish that which I have purposed,
and prosper in that for which I sent it,” says the Lord.

(Isa. 55:10-11; BCP 87)

God's purpose and power are as unstoppable, you might say, as a mustard seed once planted. Though why anyone would want to plant a mustard seed is almost beyond me. We do like a bit for our hot dogs and Chinese food. But mustard is a weed, a very invasive one. It is not welcome by farmers or gardeners; it will take over a vacant lot in no time at all, given half a chance.

This parable, like the first also must have sounded like a *joke* when Jesus told it. Not so much the comparison of great things coming from small beginnings. That makes sense. But comparing the rule of God, whose glory fills the whole earth, to a weed?

Do we really want to tell people this: we are looking expectantly for the coming of a time of the power and will of God that is like a plant that, while tasty, is a noxious nuisance—was in Jesus' time, still is today? How embarrassing! Mustard can become a big shrub, 5, 6, even 10 feet tall—really visible. But why not something more majestic and impressive, like a cedar of Lebanon, or a California redwood? Wow!

Oh . . . it's that part about the unexpected, what is offensive to us yet—perversely?—chosen by God. The liveliness, the power of God is to be seen, touched, tasted, even now, in things that are not impressive or desirable; things and conditions we'd like to see rooted out, or at least put out of sight and out of mind; the liveliness, the power of God is present and alive in people who are unimportant, unwelcome, overlooked.

Like the homeless, the mentally ill, the destitute and desperate
Little, unimportant people like the eighth son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, young David
forgotten in the fields, keeping the sheep—didn't make it into that favored group of "the seven
sons"

People whose views and way of life are strange, offensive, threatening
A savior who gave himself to be hung on the cross to die.

What if the realm of God is to be seen and found not only, or not even so much in our
victories as in our defeats? What if we looked with open trusting eyes at the unappealing things
about ourselves or our communities—our weaknesses, fears, and failures—instead of looking for
God's power only in what is magnificent, certifiably worthy; instead of believing that to be part
of the realm of God we always have to be shiny, confident, doing well, thank you.

Maybe the seeds of the awesome, transforming presence and power of the Holy are
everywhere: in our misfortunes and heartbreaks, even in our enemies; even in our death.

I'm just wondering, you know, because of those seeds growing and bearing of
themselves, and that mustard, that weed that reveals the very power and purpose of God.

The very peculiar garden of a most peculiar Gardener.

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Those of you who know John-Bosco Hakizimana or have heard us talk about him here at
Redeemer will not be surprised to hear that John was very much on my mind and in my heart as I
was writing this sermon. John-Bosco came to this country as a refugee from his beloved country
of Burundi; he was fleeing for his life. He was with us here at Redeemer for about a year,
brought to us through an anti-torture group.

John's original plan was to seek asylum and permanent residence in the U.S. But, in
time, he realized that God had another plan: for John to return to Burundi and his family, once
the men who were seeking his life were imprisoned. You see, John had a vision for Burundi: to
bring about reconciliation among a people devastated by violence, poverty and hunger. And he
has done that, planting seeds of peace and reconciliation through a program of planting trees and
teaching non-violent communication, "Hope for Burundi."

Redeemer has been blessed to be part of that vision from its beginning. And as it
happens, for the past ten days, three parishioners have been with John, his family and the people
working with Hope for Burundi. They will be back in Bethesda tonight.

Early last week, we received word that John-Bosco was seriously ill in the hospital.
There was no diagnosis. On Thursday, we learned that John had liver cancer.

Once liver cancer has become symptomatic, there is no treatment. Before we had even
had time to absorb this devastating news, we learned that John-Bosco died yesterday.

John-Bosco was a radiant being, filled to overflowing with the light and the joy of Christ. He has touched so many people, not only at Redeemer but also in many other parts of the community. In his presence and in his work, we have known the presence of Christ.

It has been our custom here to have a time of silence following the sermon. I invite you into that silence now, to hold John-Bosco, his family and many friends before God in prayer. I will end the silence with a prayer from the Burial Service.

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O God of grace and glory, we remember before you this day our brother John-Bosco We thank you for giving him to us, his family and friends, to know and to love as a companion on our earthly pilgrimage. In your boundless compassion, console us who mourn. Give us faith to see in death the gate of eternal life, so that in quiet confidence we may continue our course on earth, until, by your call, we are reunited with those who have gone before; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen