

## Manningham Uniting Church

Fellowship@10

16th June 2024: Pentecost 4

Theme: The Power of Small

Text: Mark 4:26-34

### Introduction

*“The kingdom of God is as if someone would **scatter seed on the ground**<sup>27</sup> and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.” (Mark 4:26,27). “He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?<sup>31</sup> It is **like a mustard seed**, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth,<sup>32</sup> yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”*

Seeds or Mustard Seeds are very tiny, but they grow large. The main theme of our lectionary readings for today is that small things can grow to have a significant impact and influence. In Samuel, the arrogant Saul is replaced by David, the youngest son of an insignificant family in an unimportant village. It is God who sees the heart, and takes the ‘small’ person who trusts in God and makes him or her someone of significance in God’s purposes. Similarly, Psalm 20 reflects on how those who trust in God know God’s victory and success. And in the Gospel, the small mustard seed becomes a large tree, revealing how important small contributions, commitments and actions are for the growth of God’s Reign in our world.

**Let me share with you some quotable quotes, relating to seeds, that I love.**

*“Every seed has a story, but only the ones that make it from the ground get to tell theirs.” —*

Eduvie Donald

*“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” — Tertullian*

*“A seed neither fears light nor darkness, but uses both to grow.” — Matshona Dhliwayo*

*“Anyone can count the seeds in an apple, but only God can count the number of apples in a seed.” — Robert Schuller*

*“To see things in the seed, that is genius.” — Lao Tzu*

*“You have to get up and plant the seed and see if it grows, but you can't just wait around, you have to water it and take care of it.” – Bootsy Collins*

*“I think that any time of great pain is a time of transformation, a fertile time to plant new seeds.” – Debbie Ford*

Do you know how to plant? Most of us from Singapore don't have green fingers. This parable Jesus tells is not about gardening or farming. Jesus is using images from gardening or farming to talk about your life and my life. His parable is a metaphor for the way God works in our lives. It's meant to be an encouragement and to offer hope. Your lives and mine are like a garden that has been planted with seeds. And you know how that works. It takes time. And a lot happens underground, hidden within the soil of our lives. There's a lot of waiting. And then one day something sprouts and begins to grow, “First the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.”

**We are always in process, living into our completion.**

Now I want you to pay attention. I am going to ask you a series of questions, many questions: “It is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground,” Jesus says.

And I wonder, who are those someones in your life?

Who has scattered seeds on the ground of your life?

And what were those seeds?

Who are the ones that gave you hope, stood by you, helped you find yourself?

In what ways did he or she offer you a place to put down roots, find stability, and get your life in order?

Who has awakened you and opened your eyes to see the world, others, and yourself differently? Who has inspired and mentored you?

Who has called forth from you more than you thought you had?

In what ways did someone grow you up and call you into your better self?

**Those are seeds scattered in your life by someone.**

Who is doing that for you today?

What seeds is she or he scattering?

And what if you and I are to be seed scatterers in the lives of others, for the life of the world?

Have you ever forgiven and reconciled with another, or asked someone's forgiveness?

### **Hello, are you still with me?**

Who have you encouraged, loved, reached out to, in compassion?

When have you sat with someone in his or her grief and said, "I'll be here for you?"

When have you spoken out and worked for justice?

When have you shared with someone else the seed that you are?

In what ways are you doing that today?

What barren ground is waiting to be seeded and planted with your life, gifts, passions, presence, and concerns?

Maybe it's the barren ground of racism, violence, poverty.

Maybe it's the barren ground across which refugee families walk seeking a better life.

Maybe it's the barren ground of loneliness, fear, or despair.

Maybe it's the barren ground of grief, pain, or heartbreak.

How might you scatter seeds in those places and a thousand others like them?

What is sprouting and growing in your life today?

What is flourishing and blossoming?

Where is there new growth?

What does that growth look like?

Is it in your faith journey, relationships, or parenting?

Maybe it's your concern for what is happening in our world today.

Maybe there's a growing compassion for those in need.

Maybe you have a new vision for who you are and how you want to live your life.  
Maybe it's a dream or vision for your life that is coming to fruition.  
Maybe your heart is softening and there's a new tenderness in your relationships.

What do you wish was growing in the garden of your life?

What colours or fragrances are missing?

Where have weeds taken over?

What needs attention?

I'm well aware that I have asked you more questions than I've given you answers. I have no answers, and Jesus offers none in today's parable. Parables don't offer answers they ask us better questions. They give us our work to do. They offer a different lens through which to see ourselves, others, and the world.

**And maybe seeing differently is the beginning of being different.**

What is this parable showing you about your life and the world?

What do you see today?

What will you do with what you see?

Celebrate and give thanks?

Water, fertilise, prune, pull some weeds?

Make some changes?

Meister Eckhart, a 14<sup>th</sup> Century German monk, says this about the seeds we've been talking about: *"The seed of God is in us. Given an intelligent and hard-working farmer, it will thrive and grow up to God, whose seed it is; and accordingly, its fruits will be God-nature. Pear seeds grow into pear trees, nut seeds into nut trees, and a God seed into God."*

Those who plant, farm, or garden well develop patience and an understanding of the growth process. They know what plants thrive under certain conditions and which do not.

Sometimes, they experiment in order to produce the right mix of nourishment from sun, soil, and rain to facilitate flourishing.

## **Hello?**

When you look at your life today, what's different compared to your life a year ago, three, five, twenty years ago? I'm not asking about circumstances or events. I am asking about you. In what ways have you changed? Have your values changed, the things that guide and direct your life?

Are your priorities different?

Has your spirituality changed?

Your concerns for the world and others?

What troubles your soul and breaks your heart these days?

Are you loving in a new way?

How has your self-image changed or the way you view the world?

What seeds have germinated and taken root in you?

What new sprouts are coming up in you?

Where is growth taking place and what does that look like?

And how did any of that happen?

Mark uses Jesus' parable of the growing seed (Mark 4:26-29) to comfort those in charge of guiding his endangered church. Mark's gospel was written in a time of high anxiety. Church leaders felt vulnerable and helpless. We can see why seed parables, while present in all three synoptic gospels, are particularly prominent in Mark.

Seeds are small and vulnerable but they can sprout and grow even in tough times. Seeds are a good image for a mysterious reality whose growth occurs without our instigation and often without our knowledge.

*A friend told me about her young son who was doing a science project. He planted several seeds and was supposed to monitor how quickly they grew. A problem arose, however. Seeds don't grow when little hands dig them up every day to see how they're doing.*

The parable of the growing seeds encourages us to have faith and patience as the seed does what seeds do.

In the parable of the mustard seed (Mark 4:30-32; Matthew 13; 31-32; Luke 13:19), the smallness of the mustard seed — characterised as the smallest of all seeds — is contrasted with the size of the final tree.

Now we know that the mustard seed doesn't really grow into a tree but a large bush. This extravagant detail is meant to remind us of the kin-dom of God. While it has small beginnings, the results are surprising. The phrase "the birds of the air nested in its branches (or shade)" connects this parable with several Old Testament passages where trees are used as metaphors for nations. Israel is depicted as a noble cedar in Ezekiel 17:22-24 — "In the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind" (v. 23). Assyria (Ezekiel 31:6) and Babylonia (Daniel 4:12) are both portrayed using the metaphor of a cedar tree. They are lofty and proud, but pride will lead to their downfall.

Jesus' parables call his audience to expect the in-breaking of God's reign into our ordinary daily lives. They also call us to remember that the kin-dom of God has its own time and rate of growth. They call us to look beyond what we see to what we hope for.

I don't know about you but it's easy to become disheartened in our attempts to love others when we often fall into destructive and hurtful patterns, and when our efforts to love so often feel inadequate. It is easy to lose hope when family members or friends or companions in the community seem to ignore or fail to respond to our attempts to serve and love.

It can be frustrating when we seek to contribute, and we feel that our gifts or opportunities are insufficient or that the resources we bring are too small. However, this week's theme calls us to value the small, the insignificant, the hidden. Every act of service, every gesture of love, every gift we give has value and makes a difference in the work of God's kin-dom in our hearts, in our communities and in the world. We may not be talented or well-known or wealthy or well-connected, but we all have fruit that we can produce and that God can use – often in ways that we won't even know.

The invitation, then, is to learn to value our small efforts and contributions as God does, and to stay faithful even when we don't see the fruits of our work.

I love these beautiful words attributed to Mother Thersa:

***“Not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love.”***

This is my last reflection with you before I retire.

Over the last three years, I have witnessed that so many of you have contributed to the life of Manningham Uniting Church. Maybe very few people know of your contributions. Often it might appear to be small or insignificant. But I want you to know this morning, your contributions matter, no matter how small they were.

Mother Teresa humbly downplayed her significance in this world, she described herself as “God's pencil — a tiny bit of pencil with which God writes what God likes.”

We are all God's small pencils.

You are God's small pencil!

Continue writing for the sake of God's Kin-dom. Don't let anyone tell you that you don't matter!

Amen.