

June 17, 2018 4th Sunday after Pentecost. Mark 4:30-34

I brought back a souvenir from vacation for my little niece and nephew—a hermit crab. How'd I keep that alive in my suitcase in the 100-degree Texas heat you ask? Well, it wasn't a real hermit crab. Have you ever seen one of those little rubbery growing animals (show the object)? They advertise that when you put this hermit crab into water and leave it for days or even a week, it is supposed grow up to 600% of its original size. "No way! That doesn't look like much in that little package. That thing is tiny! There's no way it will grow that big." But I can attest to it myself, it's no sham! A few years back I did this experiment myself with a growing snake. At the start it was about a foot long and half an inch thick. But I didn't just leave it in the water a few days. I left it in the water all summer in the baking heat and when I took it out it was taller than I am, longer than 6 feet, and 3 or 4 inches thick. **The snake grew that big!**

"Vicar, why are you talking about a silly toy you can buy at the dollar store? "Helloo!!!! This is time for God's word." Why does a sermon message often start with something that seems off topic? It's because this is the method Jesus used time after time to teach the people and his disciples. You heard his words as he began, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like? What parable shall we use to describe it?" What's a parable again? It's a comparison, an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. A parable takes a spiritual truth and compares it to something simple or common from your everyday life. It's a way to go from a deep abstract kind of concept to something tangible and concrete, something you know and can wrap your mind around.

So what does the growing hermit crab or the snake have to do with this text. We could use them to make much the same point Jesus did in his parable. **The kingdom of God grows!** The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. The mustard seed was generally known to be the smallest of the seeds that were common to the people at the time. Picture a mustard seed being about the size of one dot of dippin' dots ice cream. Since it's the smallest seed, you'd expect the smallest plant. You'd expect it to be proportionate. Smaller seed, smaller plant, bigger seed bigger plant.

But the mustard seed blows the proportions out of the water. It's the smallest seed planted in the garden, but it grows to become the largest of all the plants in the garden. Now its not like the mustard seed is the biggest of all trees, like a redwood or tall oak. It's usually between 8 and 20 feet tall. The point is, for a garden plant and especially for the smallest seed, it way outgrows the other garden plants. It outgrows all expectations. It

starts small, grows, and then sends out branches big enough for birds to come and perch and make their nests. The mustard seed doesn't look like much at the beginning. It's insignificant, puny. It doesn't seem like it could possibly have the potential. **But it grows and grows and grows**, far beyond proportion!

This is how the kingdom of God is. It started from the smallest of seeds. It certainly didn't look like much when Jesus was born in a stable and placed in a manger. It didn't look like much when it was a small band of uneducated fishermen following Jesus. It certainly didn't seem like any sort of kingdom at all when Jesus was nailed to the cross like a criminal. Nor did it seem any better when those scared followers were huddled in locked room thinking their Messiah was dead. How tempting it was for anyone looking at Jesus' supposed kingdom of God to say, "Where is it? If it's here, it's too small, too insignificant, it'll never matter!"

Those thoughts of doubt and insignificance pillage our minds even to this day. "God's kingdom is too small, and it definitely doesn't seem to be growing. Christianity at least in our perception, seems to be shrinking by the multitudes. Churches are closing. People don't like Christians anymore and every other religion seems to be growing faster. Either God's not paying attention or he's not as powerful as he says he is. And what are we gonna do about it anyway? How are we going to make a difference? We aren't that big of a congregation and most people have no idea what the Wisconsin synod is either. What can I do about it? I'm just one miniscule person and I'm terrible at sharing my faith. I get all tripped on my words every time I open my mouth. People are never going to listen to me! How is God's kingdom ever going to grow? It feels so small and there's no potential."

The parable of the mustard seed is the answer for that sinful doubting pity party that goes on inside our heads and hearts. Here Jesus gives a simple and concrete answer to all of our doubts. **The kingdom of God grows!** What exactly is this "kingdom of God" anyway? The kingdom of God is Christ's reign as Savior and King in the heart of every believer. It's his reign in your heart through faith, where he has conquered your sin and won forgiveness for you. Standing side by side, each believer forms the ranks of a kingdom that is truly not of this world. This is not a physical, earthly kingdom with palaces or wealth. This is a kingdom furnished by God's love and graciously ruled by Christ our dear Savior.

Sure this kingdom certainly did not look like much when Jesus Christ was nailed to a cross, but look at what that event accomplished. Through that cross, Jesus conquered the devil and everyone who would stand against

his kingdom. Through the cross he brought the forgiveness of sins for all people. By what seemed to be the insignificant execution of a supposed criminal, Jesus brought victory and eternal life for all who believe. This is God's grace at work! This is God's grace powering the seed of his kingdom. This is what makes it grow beyond all expectations. God's kingdom truly does grow! Like the smallest mustard seed that far surpasses all the other plants. The seed of the kingdom of God grows into a tree, and grows larger as more and more branches grow—more and more people experience forgiveness and the certainty of heaven.

From the tiny seed of Jesus' first disciples who were witnesses of the resurrection, **the kingdom of God grew**. From the insignificant group of believers that met in houses, **the kingdom of God grew**, even by three thousand in one day on that first day of Pentecost. Then it sent out branches, missionaries and churches across the whole region from Jerusalem to Rome. And now look at how the kingdom of God has grown in about the last 2000 years since then. It's a kingdom that bridges continents, crosses cultures and languages. It's in the small towns, it's in the multi-million people cities. Around the globe, the estimate is 2 billion Christians. This is God's grace powering the growth of his kingdom. This is Christ's reign of forgiveness and love spreading and penetrating the lives of believers everywhere.

Last week I had the chance to attend our convention for the Western Wisconsin District of our Wisconsin synod. There we got to hear about the amazing ways in which God is growing his kingdom all over the world through the work of our synod's missionaries. Recently a church body in Vietnam ran across sermons that were posted online by a Hmong pastor serving at one of our WELS churches in Kansas City. This group had never before heard the message that we are sinners saved by the grace of God alone. That church body asked the Hmong pastor to come visit them and teach them. What has resulted from this one encounter is a group of a hundred thousand Christians in Vietnam asking to be trained by our WELS synod. The Vietnamese government has even seen the benefit this group is having on the country and has invited us to build a theological training center in Vietnam. **The kingdom of God grows!** Sometimes by leaps and bounds!

That sounds amazing, but maybe it seems too far away to connect with you. That's across the globe. Want something closer to home? Look at how the kingdom is growing in our corner of Wisconsin. 20 years ago, Resurrection began with just a few members meeting in a strip mall above

the Chinese restaurant. Now it has grown to include 400 members hearing God's word at sites in both Verona and Monroe, and has already sent off a branch, a daughter congregation, Good News in Mount Horeb. That branch of the tree has gone from 30 souls to 130 souls, and from a strip mall to the cusp of buying land for a building. And our congregation has plans to send off more branches of the mustard tree, more sites where by God's grace, people will hear the saving message and be brought into his kingdom. **The kingdom of God grows** as our congregation proclaims God's word in our community and from city to city!

Are you still waiting for how this applies specifically to you? How are your efforts going to matter? How your efforts are going to make a difference? God's kingdom grows by his grace and power alone, but the instruments he has chosen to make it grow are individual people. Individual souls—yes, that means you—sharing God's love with more souls all around you, one soul at a time. And don't think that this has to be the whole full-grown, mustard tree size effort all at once. Remember, it starts small, from just the seed! It doesn't have to look like much. You don't have to be some kind of trained evangelist to do it. You already have the best qualification—you're a regular everyday person, but you know the grace of Jesus for yourself! And you know far more regular everyday people than any pastor knows.

You don't have to psyche yourself out or make it too complicated. Maybe it's just holding the door for someone and introducing yourself. It's just inviting your neighbor over for dinner and showing you actually care. Maybe it's just a brief conversation with an overwhelmed coworker, just a small word of encouragement about how your peace comes from Jesus. Just a simple invite to come with you and hear about the thing that is most important to you—the life-saving message of Jesus. Then wait and see how God makes his kingdom grow, one soul at a time. Wait and see how God uses the efforts of a bumbling stumbling sinner like you and me to make his kingdom grow. His kingdom is not too small, it's not too weak. **The kingdom of God is powered by his grace and grows** from one saved soul to the next. **Amen.**