

The readings for Sunday, June 17, 2018:

First Reading: Ezekiel 17:22-24

First Reading (Semi-cont.): 1 Samuel 15:34--16:13

Psalm: Psalm 92:1-4, 11-14 (Psalm 92:1-4, 12-15 NRSV)

Psalm (Semi-cont.): Psalm 20

Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:6-10 [11-13] 14-17

Gospel: Mark 4:26-34

In the Gospel for Sunday, we hear the teaching that compares the kingdom of God (think this world, not Heaven) to seeds, in particular the mustard seed. It's an agricultural metaphor that makes me wonder, as I always do, how well these metaphors work as we move away from being a culture that grows plants. If we've never planted a seed and tended the sprouts, is the parable lost on us?

What might a modern parable teller use? Mold? A virus that overtakes a human or a computer system? A bit of code that destroys a computer program?

We might object to those ideas. We might say, "Those metaphors are so destructive – surely Jesus didn't have that in mind?"

Many scholars, however, would point out that mustard seeds left untended do grow into plants that can be terribly destructive, even as they provide shelter for birds. It's great for birds, but not so great for anything else that a farmer wanted to grow. The mustard seed would grow into a plant that had the potential to strangle everything else.

The Kingdom of God is a weed that strangles the plants we intended to grow to become a huge tree that shelters birds – yes, we can see how the earliest audiences of Jesus might go away confused.

Return to that idea of a seed, something tiny that can grow into something huge. Think about the self-contained nature of the seed. This part of the metaphor might provide comfort.

The Kingdom of God doesn't start out huge. It begins as a tiny seed that just needs some water, some soil, and some light – nothing revolutionary, but from humble beginnings, a revolution begins.

In these post-Pentecost times, it's good to remember that we're not required to arrive on the scene full-grown. Often in the post-Pentecost narratives and in the letters of Paul, I come away feeling inadequate, as I look at what those early believers managed to accomplish with such few resources.

And here I am, with all sorts of technological advances, only to spend so much time stumbling and beginning again.

Yet the parables remind me that even small seeds can become fields of wheat that feed a nation or giant trees that shelter wildlife.

What do we need to sprout? What soil and spiritual manure would help us become more firmly rooted? Summer might be a great time to try a new spiritual practice or to return to a practice that fell away in the hectic pace of Lent and Easter. More prayer? More journaling? A book and/or study group? A service project?

What water would refresh us and encourage us to sprout? A different kind of worship service? A retreat at a church camp or a monastery? An online learning community? Some work to create social justice?

How can we get the balance of enough sunshine and shade? For all the time we plan to spend in spiritual activity, we should plan for Sabbath time too, a time to stay still and unplug/unwind.

You may feel like a dried-out husk that has no hope of sprouting. The Gospels assure us that we are little pods of potential waiting to bloom.