

## **The Precious Promise**

When spring nears most retail stores sell seeds, seeds for flowers and vegetables of every possible variety. On the front cover of the seed packets is the picture of what I will call "the precious promise". This precious promise is a picture of the beautiful flower or delicious vegetable that this packet of seed will grow, if you just simply purchase it and plant it into the ground or a pot of dirt.

My dad is the first gardener that I remember. He used to grow flowers on the side of the house and vegetables in the backyard. It was his ritual every spring to plant the flowers and the vegetables, so that as spring moved into summer our family could enjoy seeing beautiful flowers and eating delicious vegetables. Among his favorites were roses, green beans, cucumbers and kohlrabi.

In his own way my dad was part of "the precious promise" each year. He would go out and get the seed, till the ground, plant and care for the garden, and when the time was right, harvest the roses for my mom and vegetables for our whole family to eat. I do enjoy the memory of fresh sliced kohlrabi on our dinner table, or the smell and taste of fresh cooked garden green beans.

The Lord Jesus teaches about seeds and "the precious promise" in our Gospel lesson for today from Mark 4. He says, "the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on all the earth; yet when it grows up becomes greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

It is as if Jesus is showing us a packet of seeds that are labeled the kingdom of God. On the front of that packet is a picture of all the wonderful things that the Lord God promises will be part of that kingdom – a great banquet, forgiveness for sins, peace and justice for all people, and everlasting life in the presence of faithful people we have loved and in the presence of the Lord himself.

But how do we get to the time and the place where this precious promise comes true? After all, a seed is a long way from a rose or an ear of corn, and so does the kingdom of God seem pretty far away to you and me on most days. We live in a world where sin and evil are rampant, where there is little peace and justice for most people, and where death is more prevalent than eternal life.

I remember coming out of seminary in 1989 to my first call at Trinity Lutheran Church in Lisbon, North Dakota. I really felt like I was ready to set the world on fire with the Gospel. I felt ready to teach about the love of God in Jesus Christ through sermons, I felt ready to motivate the people of God to serve within their community and the world so peace and justice would be present for all people.

Then there was my first week alone. I had spent two weeks with my Senior Pastor training in so to speak. Then he and his family went on vacation. I imagined all sorts of wonderful things while he was gone. But then in one week there were three deaths and funerals – a 34 year old man died in a work related accident, a 13 year was hit by a car, and a 94 year died of natural causes.

I learned that week how small I am and how much I need the Lord from day to day to accomplish anything. I learned that week that the kingdom of God does not come from what I do but it comes from God. I learned that week that while God has a lot of plans for us in our lives, that when it comes to the kingdom of God, we simply trust in the precious promise that God will make it happen.

I wonder what goes on in your life that makes you feel small. I wonder what is overwhelming you from day to day that makes you wonder if the kingdom of God will ever come. I wonder how impossible to you it seems that this present world can be moving or shall we say growing toward “the precious promise” of the kingdom of God that Jesus gives us in the Gospel lesson today.

Well, let me offer you some hope. I was searching the internet this week for pictures of mustard plants in Israel. I was pleased to find some beautiful pictures of yellow mustard plants filling whole valleys there. This plant has been growing in Israel perhaps since creation itself, and Jesus would have seen such valleys full of mustard plants with birds living in and among them.

How can one seed lead such a valley full of beautiful yellow mustard plants? That is the miracle of course. It doesn't happen unless a seed is sown into the ground and it grows and spreads into this beautiful scene. The same is true for the kingdom of God. It starts so small. It starts as small as your faith in God. But Lord takes us and our faith and grows it into a miracle.

When we look at our individual lives, so much seems impossible. We are at times so overwhelmed by life and what happens here on earth. But God is not overwhelmed. God is with you and helping you and growing you. You are part of what will one day be so beautiful, so wonderful, and that is the kingdom of God. You are part of “the precious promise” of our Gospel lesson.

When you feel small, when your faith seems so insignificant, when God seems far away, and when the idea of the kingdom of God seems like it is a figment of your imagination, remember this precious promise Jesus gives us today. It is a picture of a true future where there is an abundance of forgiveness, love, peace, and justice, and eternal life for a lot of birds, that is, the people of God.

The Lord will fill your life, and the Lord will fill the earth with the kingdom of God. He is growing that very thing right now. There will be a day when your life

and when our world will be full of the kingdom of God, just like a valley in Israel is full of yellow mustard plants. It may seem like a long way off today, but so is a rose seed a long way off from rose, and corn seed from an ear of corn.

Who are the birds in this precious promise Jesus gives of the kingdom of God? As I just said, they are the people of God, the people of God from every nation. I would like to share a little something with you about that today. It is a short story of an artist who was asked to create a stained glass window for a church with the theme – “Let all the little children come to me”.

One day he spent many hours painting the model picture of the window, and after he finished it he went to bed. While he was sleeping he heard some noise in his studio. He went in there and found a man painting on his picture. He asked the man to stop because he was ruining the picture. The man said that he was not ruining the picture, he was finishing it.

The artist asked what the man meant. The man said that all the children’s faces that were gathered around Jesus were white. He said that he figured the picture was not done yet because the children around Jesus are not just white, but are also red, yellow, black and brown. So he told the artist that he was just helping him finish the painting by adding color to some of the children’s faces.

The next morning the artist awakened to find the picture as he had left it, with all the faces of the children being white. That was when he realized the Lord had spoken to him in a dream, telling him to add color to the children’s faces, and so now in the light of day, the artist did just that. For in the kingdom of God, the children around Jesus will be of every race, of every color.

I am thinking of my dad today standing with packets of seed before an empty garden, planting those seeds with the hope of a wonderful harvest of roses and cucumbers, green beans and kohlrabi and more. He plants the seeds looking forward to something he can’t yet see, but looking forward to it nevertheless. This is the precious promise of the seed packets that he holds.

I am also thinking today of the kingdom of God, quietly growing in your life, in my life, and in the life of the world. God is not growing varieties of flowers and vegetables, but varieties of people and their future instead. If you feel like you are small or far away from that precious promise, pray to God today to help you, and hear me say, that this precious promise is for you too.

In other words, forgiveness, love, peace, justice, and eternal life, as abundant as a valley full of mustard plants – precious promises from God and for you.

Amen.