

Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle B
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – June 17, 2018
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With the exception of the occasional poppy seed muffin or a handful of sunflower seeds, I am pretty far removed from the world of seeds. I have purchased a flat of plants at the nursery over the years and somewhat successfully transplanted them into a garden, but I cannot honestly say that I have grown a plant from seed since a grade school science project. I suspect that many of you are in the same situation. We may work with plants, but it is other people – the professionals – who plant the seeds.

That wasn't the case in first century Galilee. If you wanted a plant, you couldn't just drive down to the garden center at Home Depot or Walmart and pick up one or two. You had to go outside yourself and scatter seeds. Today's gospel introduces us to the mystery of farming in the ancient world. To first century farmers, it must have indeed seemed just as Jesus described – they scattered seeds, waited and eventually they would get a harvest – they did not know how. We, of course, could explain germination in detailed scientific terms – but even the most advanced horticulturists cannot tell you exactly why one seed sprouts and another lies dormant, why one plant thrives and another withers, why one plant bears fruit and another does not. For all of our advanced knowledge, the natural world still holds its mysteries.

So, I am afraid, does the human heart. No one can truly explain why one person's heart is so large that it seems to encompass everyone while another's is so guarded that it admits no one. That's the true message of the gospel today. Jesus wasn't really speaking about planting and harvesting, of course, but about sowing the seeds of faith and hope and love – and waiting for them to grow. Just as seeds, the kingdom of God grows mysteriously, nurtured by the faith of others, drawn out by the light of Christ, watered by the love of Holy Spirit. The growth of the kingdom of God is gradual and mysterious – and today's gospel reminds us of three essential facts.

First, in order for the kingdom of God to blossom, Jesus tells us, the seed must be scatted, sown, planted. You can wish and hope and pray all you want to, but your backyard will not suddenly become a wheat field unless you take the time to plant wheat – to till the soil and scatter the seeds and water and nourish the tender stalks. Wheat, soybeans, cotton, mustard do not spontaneously grow. They must be planted. And faith must be planted. In order for anyone to have faith in Jesus Christ, someone must first proclaim the gospel. No one wakes up one day with a deep and abiding faith unless someone has first planted the seed – introduced that person to Jesus,

shown them his love and mercy, shared with them their own faith. We cradle Catholics too often imagine that people will spontaneously walk through the door brimming with faith. Evangelization is God's work, not mine, we tell ourselves. But each of us is called to scatter seeds, to share our faith – in large ways and in small. If we truly believe that all are called to holiness, then we must all be planting the seeds of holiness.

Second, Jesus spoke of the power of the mustard seed. Though a remarkably little seed, when fully grown the mustard plant – at least in Jesus' day – was a majestic shrub whose branches could provide shade for the birds of the air. It doesn't take much effort on our part. God does most of the work. But we have to give God a chance – a real chance. And that means planting more than one seed. Too many parents hear this parable and think – well, if all it takes is faith the size of a mustard seed, then I'll get my child baptized and let God do the rest. They don't bother to pray with their children at home, to share their own faith, to bring them to Mass, to provide them with a religious education, or with the benefit of their example, and then they wring their hands and wonder why their adult child doesn't have faith. One seed may be planted at baptism, but seeds can and should be planted each day – by the way we treat one another, by our own demonstration of faith and hope and charity, by our example of forgiveness and mercy and holiness. Yes, God can work with just a small seed – but why test him? If one seed of faith can produce a small plant – then why not scatter new seeds of faith every day?

And finally, we need to be careful of the seeds that we scatter. True, in our lifetime we may sow one or two mustard seeds of faith – but what chance do they have if every other day of our lives we are planting seeds of bitterness and hatred, seeds of anger and dissention. How can we hope to attract anyone to the faith if we are too busy talking behind people's backs or ridiculing our neighbor? How can one seed break through if we are doing everything in our power to uproot it by our talk and by our actions? It does very little good to bring a child to Mass, for example, if we return to our car and immediately begin criticizing how that person in front of us was dressed, or the choice of music, or the quality of Father's speaking voice, or the arrangement of decorations or the furniture in the sanctuary. The seed of faith that might have been planted in the child at Mass will – I assure you – be overwhelmed by the criticism and the anger and the nitpicking they hear in that car ride home. If we cannot tend the planted seed, nurture it and water it by our own example – then we should do what the man did in the gospel. Scatter the seed and then leave it alone. Rise and sleep and allow the seed to sprout and grow on its own – with God's help – and without our interference. It only takes faith the size of a mustard seed, but sometimes it also means that we need to get out of God's way.