

“Urban Gardening”

Mark 4:26-34

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It has been almost seventy years since one was on the White House lawn. During WW II, Eleanor Roosevelt planted a vegetable garden that was quickly dubbed, the Victory Garden.

This spring, Michelle Obama, along with her two children and twenty-three fifth grade students from nearby Bancroft Elementary School, planted a vegetable garden on the south side of the White House, just below Malia and Sasha’s swing set. The 1,100 square foot garden can be seen by the public walking by the White House.

The purpose of the garden is not only to provide food for the First Family, but to educate all children about the importance of eating healthy food at a time when obesity and diabetes have become a national concern. I believe it is working.

This year, forty-three million Americans planted gardens, two times the usual number. Urban gardens have sprung up all over our cities and it is estimated that many families will save two hundred dollars a month on grocery bills. Nutritionists are excited and are telling people that “all it takes to plant a garden is a little seed, a little knowledge and a little space.”

I get the feeling Jesus would refer to the White House garden in one of his parables. He was a master at using common and familiar images to make a point. He did that in our text when he compared the Kingdom of God to planting seeds in the ground. Since he was in the open-air phase of his ministry around the Sea of Galilee, he was confident that everyone listening would relate to his agriculture reference.

“He also said, ‘The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground and would sleep night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.’

He also said, ‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth. 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.’

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. He did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples”
Mark 4:26-34.

What point was Jesus making in these parables? What did he want the disciples to know about the work to which they had been called? What does he want us to understand? Let me give you some things to consider.

I think he wants us to know that, for the most part, the Kingdom of God, or the world that God envisioned, will be built upon the accumulation of small deeds. As a matter of fact, no deed is too small or insignificant in God’s eyes. Growth will occur if seeds are planted.

This is why Jesus used the mustard plant as an example. On average, mustard shrubs in the Mideast grow to be about eight to ten feet in height. This seems almost impossible since it sprouts from one of the smallest seeds known to man.

Just as a tiny seed can produce a large bush that is a reliable source of food, medicine and shade, so can small deeds done in Christ’s name make a big difference in the lives of people. Good deeds don’t have to come in big packages. Small ones are just as important. Our job, then, is to plant seeds in the fields that God gives us, sometimes intentionally and at other times, spontaneously.

Irish playwright, Oscar Wilde, tells of an incident that had a profound impact upon him. He spent two years in prison for various offenses and once when he was being transferred from

prison to the Court of Bankruptcy, he saw an old acquaintance in the crowd. "He performed an action so kind and simple that it has remained with me ever since," Wilde wrote. "He simply raised his hat to me and gave me the kindest smile that I have ever received as I passed by, handcuffed with head bowed. I have never said one single word to him about what he did, but I store it in the treasure of my heart. That small bit of kindness brought me out of the bitterness of lonely exile into harmony with the wounded, broken and great heart of the world."

Seven-foot center Dwight Howard has put the Orlando Magic on the basketball map. He was the first pick in the 2004 NBA draft and has become a star on the Magic's team. Orlando and the LA Lakers are currently playing for the NBA championship.

Howard grew up in Atlanta and played his high school ball at Southwest Atlanta Christian Academy. He was not only an outstanding basketball player at that school, but a model student and classmate. Headmistress Geraldine Thompson says that Howard spent as much time as possible working with the elementary children. He loved being around them and was a good role model for them.

One parent tells a story about her son and Howard. Her son was a fringe player on the same team with Howard. This young man happened to be an outstanding student and cringed when it came time to stand up during honor awards day. "My son was ashamed of being smart," she says.

Howard knew this about her son and how embarrassed he was at getting an award. When the award was given, Howard immediately jumped up and clapped for him, leading everyone else to do the same and making her son feel more comfortable.

These are the kinds of small deeds that make a big difference in people's lives. They are spiritual mustard seeds that produce a harvest of goodwill, self-esteem, confidence and community.

There are others, aren't there? A hammer on a nail at a Habitat house, a handwritten note of encouragement, a warm pot of soup, a spoken word of gratitude, a lesson taught at Vacation Bible school or in Sunday School, a visit to a nursing home, a conversation on a plane--all of these are seeds that, if planted, can produce great harvests.

What keeps us from planting these seeds? Perhaps we planted seeds that did not grow and we don't want to be disappointed again. I understand. Not all seeds take root. Every farmer knows this. However, this doesn't keep farmers or gardeners from planting more seeds and I don't believe it should us, either.

Could it be that we don't have a "holy imagination" and fail to see the good even the smallest of deeds can produce. Down in our hearts, we do not believe that God can be in something so small or that it will have a positive impact. We fall prey to the idea that if it is not big, it is not valuable.

A Texan was visiting his friend who was a small Iowa farmer. "Is this all the land you have?" he asked. "Where I come from, I can get in my car at 6:00 in the morning and drive all day and never see the end of my land." "Is that right," the Iowa farmer replied. "I used to have a car like that, too!"

I believe that one lesson Jesus taught his disciples through our text was that change often begins as a seed that only faith notices. No good deed is too small to matter and no seed too tiny to grow. It is the little things that we consistently do that improve our marriage, make us better parents, raise our grades in school, strengthen our business, contribute to better health and make us better neighbors.

Twentieth century author, politician, advertising executive and motivational speaker Bruce Barton came to this conclusion and shared it with his audience. "I am tempted to believe that there are no little things," he was fond of saying. I agree.

Who planted a small seed in your heart that changed your life? What did they do? What difference did it make in your life? I wonder how many seeds were planted before some took root.

What seeds have you planted that grew and produced a wonderful harvest? Were they seeds of hope, compassion, faith, faithfulness, friendship, forgiveness or integrity? Have you celebrated their growth and the harvest that resulted? I hope you have.

What seeds do you need to plant this week? Will you ask the Lord to show you and help you to take advantage of the opportunities that will come your way? I am confident He will.

George Burns portrayed God in the 1997 movie, "Oh, God!" After someone said that His mission to change the world for the better was a failure, he replied, "Oh, I don't think so. You never know, a seed here, a seed there, something will catch hold and grow."

I hope that something will be the seed you plant this week.