

“God’s Covert Mission”

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Third Sunday after Pentecost: June 12-13, 2021

Mark 4:26-34

²⁶He also said, “The *kingdom of God* is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

³⁰He also said, “With what can we compare the *kingdom of God*, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³²yet 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.”

³³With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

The reign of God will mess with established boundaries and conventional values. Like a fast-replicating plant, it will get into everything. It will bring life and color to desolate places. It will crowd out other concerns. It will resist our manipulations. Its humble appearance will expose and mock pride and pretentiousness like a good burlesque show.

Anybody want to join me on a covert mission? Yes, that’s right, I said covert. Secretive. Underground. Hidden. Hush-hush. Sound interesting? Want to hear more?

In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus was always telling the disciples to keep it quiet. “Keep it quiet now, no one needs to know who I am. Don’t tell them I am Messiah.” Over and over again, Jesus repeats this Messianic secret. “Don’t tell!”

So then one day, He is teaching the disciples and narrates this parable about the mustard seed. We know this story. We’ve known it since we were children in Sunday school. Here’s the cup, fill it with dirt, put the seed in and give it some water. Take it home and put it in the sunlight and wait to see what comes up! The idea is what is little gets bigger and God provides the growth. Perfect! What a great way to teach about the mustard seed.

But that’s for three year olds. We’re not three anymore. So Jesus puts His NCIS or Blue Bloods police jacket on and says to the disciples one day, “God is on a covert mission. Let me tell you about a mustard seed.”

Because the point of a parable is the irony. The satire. The exaggeration. In Jesus’ time a mustard plant wasn’t welcome. It was not a plant that people would actually sow. The mustard plant was a weed that grew in all the wrong places. It wouldn’t stay put. This was a prolific plant. We’re tending our yards and gardens right now. Think dandelions, think thistle. Got it?

Now, think those creeping long ivy like weeds that once they start, you can hardly spray enough Round-up to ever kill them. That's mustard seed! Ha!

Now hear it again! God's kingdom is like a mustard seed.....growing here and then there and popping up over there. "Oh dang, now it's on this side of the lawn. Didn't I just spray that yesterday?" Yes! Our God is a covert God. Ready to join God's mission?

When God is at God's best work, God is messing with established boundaries. God is messing with conventional rules. God crowds out traditional and customary guidelines and regulations and then resists our attempts to manipulate them! Dang it! Round-up might work on weeds but it doesn't work with God. Do you see it now?

Covert operations. I'm guessing there are a few of you out there that enjoy tv cop shows. Yes? Now, we fully realize that most of these shows are not anything like what real-life police work is like today. God bless men and women who put their lives on the line each day. But for we tv viewers...the element of suspense, the secret operations planned to get the bad guys which will expose their vices and interrupt their illegal businesses...plus the good cops always go home alive...is what attracts viewers. That's what I'm talking about!

Here's a true story about mustard seed faith and life. Daniel and Emily Womack were each sensing God's call to something new in their lives, but they hadn't mentioned it one another. Daniel wanted a job more fulfilling spiritually than just making money. Emily wanted their five year old daughter, Molly, to experience more family time. It wasn't until they began to talk did they realize God was calling them both.

The more they prayed, they decided to join Mercy Ships, floating hospitals which dock in countries all over the world providing humanitarian aid. Daniel would be the ship's security officer and Emily could volunteer in the galley or the renovations department when Molly was in onboard school. With eagerness, they began in summer of 2019, docking in Senegal.

Have you ever heard the phrase, if you want to make God laugh, then make a plan? The Womacks planned to end their service in May of 2020. That couldn't happen because of the pandemic. So their Mercy Ship relocated to the Canary Islands where they could dock but not go ashore.

The extended time on board without any patients in the hospital was intense. But God's undisclosed plan wouldn't be deterred. "Once the frontline people all left, we focused on the crew—doing what we could to keep up their morale," Emily said. Molly's Movie nights on Fridays were a huge hit.

The Womacks wound up living on the *Africa Mercy* from summer 2019 to October 2020. "The experience tested us big-time. Staying on the ship fulfilled our calling to serve others in unanticipated ways. We're still in touch with some of the crew."

A tiny mustard seed of feeling called, born into the hearts of Daniel and Emily...from that to Molly's Movie nights on board a Mercy Ship in the Canary Islands...God gets into everything and cannot be deterred! (<https://www.livinglutheran.org/2021/05/a-call-to-service-and-a-pandemic/>)

We realize, don't we, in this mustard seed parable, that Jesus was actually speaking about Himself? A tiny baby, born in Bethlehem in the shadows of one of the greatest emperors in history, would grow up to shatter all the religious boundaries and conventional rules not only of Jewish life, but also to threaten the largest political empire on earth at the time.

It wasn't Round-Up, but it was a cross that tried to end the covert mission. Yet even that didn't work. Standing at the foot of the cross, it was a Roman centurion who finally realized and confessed, "Truly, the man was God's Son!"

The mustard seed of Jesus' life has yet to be contained. You and I are here today!

It is in this truth that we hear both Law and Gospel. God's mission of reaching all people all over the world will be accomplished despite our shortcomings. Likewise, we hear life-saving Gospel Good News that God's mission of reaching people all over the world will be accomplished despite our shortcomings.

But that doesn't mean we stay out of God's way! No, precisely not! We shoot secret prayers at the person in the car next to us at the stop light. We pay the Starbucks bill for the car behind us in the drive through. We turn the other cheek for Jesus' sake when someone hurts our pride. We slip a greenback into the homeless woman's hand. Jesus even encouraged this! He said, "Give your alms in secret and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

Our Lord, Jesus, God Godself, born in a stable will find, creep, crawl, and plan to enter and implement God's mission into every known and undisclosed location...including our hearts.

Including our hearts...ready to join God's covert mission?