

It's estimated that Vincent Van Gogh created over 30 variations of what is called, "The Sower." Some were paintings, some were drawings and sketches, but each one different from the rest. Mostly we remember Van Gogh for his self-portrait or "Starry Night," but it would seem that the subject that most caught his eye was that of a sower. A bit odd, when you think about it. The humble sower is by far the most painted subject in Van Gogh's collection.

But maybe it's not such a bad thing, to be reminded of the dedication and patience and faith that a sower must have. It certainly seems to be what Jesus is largely getting at in the first of two parables we have today. He likens the kingdom of God to someone who scatters seed on the ground. And over time, despite hardly seeing any change from day to day, the seed sprouts and blooms – much of it without any assistance from the farmer.

Martin Luther, in his Small Catechism, had this to say about the kingdom of God: "In fact, God's kingdom comes on its own without our prayers." Now he would go on to say that we certainly pray that we would be an active participant in it, but it says something about the way the kingdom of God works in the world. One, that it is inevitable. It will continue to grow and be made manifest, because that's what it does naturally. And two, that you and I are called to be sowers, scattering the seeds of promise wherever we go. You and I cannot make it grow. We cannot make it grow any faster. But we can spread the seeds and allow God's kingdom to do what it does.

But there comes a time in the parable when the sower finally notices what has come of the scattered seeds. And it's interesting here that Jesus tacks on another parable, separate and yet almost expanding upon the first. If the kingdom is like scattered seed, just what kind of seed is it?

When I was college, I had the opportunity to study in Europe for a semester. And one of the things you learn very quickly is how easy it is to travel within Europe. So I was fortunate enough to visit 4 countries during my time there and one of the things that I noticed while visiting each place was the presence of gardens. But not just any kind of garden – these were formal gardens, not so much there for their produce, but for their aesthetic appeal. They were all over the place – in Germany at the Residenz in Wurzburg, in Austria at Schönbrunn Palace in Vienna, in France at Versailles, and of course in England, this one taken of the garden at Kensington Palace. Each one unique and beautiful, and yet all have that same rigid feeling to them.

Which is why I know you might be thinking that these gardens are great and all, pretty to look at, yada yada yada, but Pastor Ryan, that's not what I think of when I think of a garden or planting seeds. And so maybe what you have in mind is something more like a greenhouse or something someone might have in their yard. And maybe yours isn't exactly like this, but you recognize it and you know that if you've ever planted a garden, having some kind of structure to it is important, especially come harvest time.

Which is why you probably won't be planting mustard anytime soon. Because mustard does not care about structure and organization and clean lines. It is the antithesis to orderliness. And so you can imagine the shock and even the laughter that would have ensued when Jesus said that the kingdom of God is like scattered seed, but not just any seed – mustard seed. It grew wildly and with abundance in Israel, so no one would ever have need to plant such a thing.

But Jesus takes the parable a step further, and I imagine that he could barely contain his own smile when he said that this mustard seed becomes the greatest of shrubs. I mean look at that thing... There's no way someone could truthfully believe it's the greatest of shrubs. It's wild. It's a jumbled, tangled mess of stems and vines and flowers. And it spreads like crazy, getting out of control. And it's hardly a plant that appeases the eye. It's like Jesus is making some big joke here. How in the world could this possibly be like the Kingdom of God?

Or maybe the question is, how could it not be about the Kingdom? It is resilient. It does not care about the boundaries we have set up. It is resistant to the limits we place upon it. It will break through the hardest of hearts and the strongest evils. It is contagious and infectious and invasive, carried easily from one place to another, until it is sprouts again in places it might have no business being. And as it grows, there is life – there is sanctuary, there is hospitality, there is sustenance, there is renewal. Do you see how we might not actually be talking about a plant at all?

And do you see how, filled with the Holy Spirit, God is inviting you and I to be a part of the greatest infestation the world has ever known? We are called to sow this incredible seed of life and hope and promise for the sake of the world. Because it's growing, no matter what. Unpredictable and so often unseen, the kingdom is here and is growing. And we pray each week that this Kingdom come in and among us, as well. So we walk in faith, filled with patience, emboldened to preach and bear witness to the presence of this kingdom. Patience, preach, repeat. For we know that the one day, the whole world will be filled with God's kingdom and it will be like the greatest of shrubs. No joke. Thanks be to God! Amen.