

Sermon Text: Mark:4 30-34

The dog that I got back a few weeks ago that I tried to give away the day after I got him, we're keeping him now. My dog's name is Lenny. That's one of two names. That's a long story, but Lenny helped me write this sermon because Lenny is just happy to be here. He notices the birds, and he just looks at them and listens to them. He notices the bugs, and he'll put his paw on them and just kind of look at them, and not eat them. He tried once, and he decided he didn't like the taste of them, so now he just touches them. He does eat the moles though. I apologize for that. He eats my wife's flowers and plants. She has hardly a flower or a plant left. When she gets back from Brazil, she's going to like my dog even less. He's not perfect, but he does appreciate nature and the radiant beauty of God's creation. Today, I'm going to try to speak just a little about a hummingbird as part of God's creation, and the miraculous thing, even though I was a biology major, I really don't know, and nobody can really explain it to my satisfaction, how a hummingbird knows, migrating from Canada to South America, how to come back to your house and your feeder, and sometimes because of specific coloring and injuries, you can tell the same hummingbird will come back year after year. They say that's habituation. I say well, but how did they find it the first time? That's what we don't know.

Now, the first time I saw a hummingbird, I was five years old, and I didn't believe it. I just didn't believe there was such a bird. It was there, and then it was there. It was so fast. I wasn't sure if there was one or there were two or if I had stumbled upon that fabled Tinkerbell, who flew around just like that at the beginning on Sunday night of “The Wonderful World of Disney.” Some of you are old enough to remember that. No, well.

So many things are like that. You think you see them, and then you're not sure that you've seen it all because you've never seen anything like it before, and so you're inclined to disbelieve your own eyes. Now, on a serious note, as we celebrate fathers, and I think back on my own childhood, and I think I've mentioned that my parents divorced when I was 12. There was a lot of turmoil going on in my household. Growing up, I saw some tiny flashes of love and peace and harmony, tiny flashes of it, here and then there, but I was disinclined to believe all that love and peace talk that I heard about in church. If I had not actually seen and experienced love in some of the people in the church, I probably never would have really believed in God.

Now, back to hummingbirds. I've always wondered, as I said, how do hummingbirds know where the sugar water is? Migrating from Canada to South America, and then finding your house each year! Somehow they find the very same house and the very same feeder. When it comes to sweetness, all we can say is hummingbirds know how to find it.

Now, Main Street congregation – men, women, boys and girls – need the sweetness of being loved and accepted and forgiven and encouraged, and that is what the kingdom of God is about. If they come here, let's make sure that they find it. Chapter 4 of the Gospel of Mark is filled with earthy stories of soil and sower, who sows these small seeds, and an enemy somewhere introduces tiny germs of evil, earlier in the chapter, then a little lump of leaven leavens the whole loaf and the invisible treasure hidden in the ground and a precious pearl,

which is worth more than all you own, and then the invisible net drawn through the sea to harvest the fish. The theme seems to be hidden things and small things. Things that seem small and inconspicuous and almost invisible turn out to be the greatest, the greatest things. First of all, I do know that there are seeds smaller than a mustard seed in the whole wide world. I know that, but among the cultivated plants in Palestine, the mustard seed was the smallest. More than that, Jesus was saying a saying, you know, as tiny as a mustard seed. That's like we might say as big as all outdoors. It was a saying, and they knew, the disciples knew, what Jesus meant. In some of the earlier parables, the disciples asked questions, and they said, “What do you mean, Jesus?” There were no questions recorded about the mustard seed parable because they knew full well what He meant. He meant something unexpectedly huge coming from something infinitesimally small. Further more, even though it was common folklore that the mustard plant grew quickly and unexpectedly large from such a tiny seed, Jesus hyperbolically spoke of the mustard plant shrub actually becoming a tree in some translations, much larger than normal, much larger than a shrub could become, and the phrase that even the birds of the air could either rest or nest in it, give the first hearers the picture that something extraordinary was going on here. Secondly, for sure, we know that mustard is not a fruit tree. It is an herb, and it is an irritant. Is anybody here old enough to have had applied to them a mustard plaster? Anybody? I see one or two hands. Back in the old days, excuse me, in the old days; if you caught cold or pneumonia, they would put this mustard plaster on your chest until your skin turned bright red. Now, there is no medical evidence that the mustard plaster ever helped anyone, but it probably burned your skin so badly that you forgot why you put it on there. I looked in Francis Asbury's journal, and he said, this is a quote, “Finding myself swelling in the face, stomach and feet, I applied a plaster of mustard, which drew a desperate blister.” He sort of forgot about his face, his stomach and his feet, I think.

You know, the Word of God can be like a mustard plaster. It can be an irritant. Hearing that you are a sinner and need a Savior is a little bit irritating. Hearing that you need to change and grow and sometimes turn around completely, which is what repentance is, that's irritating to our ego, but is nonetheless true, and it is the beginning of the cure. Now, I'm not going to go into the centuries of commentaries that argue that birds might represent evil or they might merely represent outsiders who are being incorporated into the kingdom of God. I think this. I think the birds could well represent the people who were not really engrafted into this amazing new thing called the kingdom of God. The word could irritate you and me today if it means this, that some people back then and right now are just resting, are just nesting in the kingdom of God for awhile, but not really connected to what God is doing.

Speaking of connected; I'm reading a book this week that has reminded me of something that we all know when we think about it. Do you know that no one knows what gravity is? No one. Not really. There are two competing theories. One from Newton, which NASA uses, and it works, and one from Einstein, which is strange, because there is no such thing as gravity, but that space is warped by mass the way a bowling ball on your bed might warp the bed, and it just kind of makes it seem like there is gravity. That's pretty strange. Imagine! The thing that keeps me connected to this planet as it spins on its axis and spins around the sun is really a complete mystery! Nobody knows precisely what gravity is, and yet it is real,

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and it is dependable, and we can experience it when we look on the scales, but we do not know what it is, though there are times when we curse it. So it is with the kingdom of God. Jesus says imagine a seed so small that it is become in its day a proverbial measure of smallness, and who is this seed in the Bible? None other than Jesus Himself, and what is that seed? None other than God's Word made flesh. Jesus, the very Word of God, the very essence of God. Jesus' life was the will of God for human life on this planet, lived out just like we don't. Jesus lived connected to God. It seemed a small thing. The perfect life of Jesus Christ, and then the planting in the tomb, and then the resurrection and the ascension, and then proving His power over sin and death.

The Apostle Paul speaks about the Gentiles being engrafted into the covenant that God first made with Israel and open to whoever would come and accept the embrace offered in Jesus Christ. I wonder, these birds of the parable are not engrafted. Birds can come and go so maybe Jesus did mean that some would come to the church, but not really become a part of the kingdom of God. Some may sit for a while on a branch and rest in the shade for a while as long as it suits them, and then just fly away! A great church is one that understands that some will plant and some will water, but it is always God who gives the increase. We plod along in a line of faithful men and women doing very small, fruitful things that add up to growth and increase and witness to the reality of the kingdom of God in the world, but a lot of times the only thing we can do, the things that we do are very small. In little ways, one person at a time, you have witnessed, and you have made people believe all that love and peace talk is real, just as I had people in my home church convince me the same.

God gives the growth, but the growth shows up in us. We are the harvest, and we are God's crop with God's word growing within.

There is an ancient fable that one day an elephant saw a hummingbird lying on its back with its feet determinedly aimed at the sky. Imagine that! A tiny, little hummingbird with its feet toward the sky! The elephant said, “What in the world are you doing hummingbird?” The hummingbird replied, “I have heard that the sky might fall today, and if that should happen, I am ready to do my best to hold it up.” The elephant laughed and he mocked the tiny bird! He said, “Do you think those tiny feet can hold up the sky?” The hummingbird said, “Not alone, but each must do what she can, and this, this is what I can do.”

John Wesley was mocked for witnessing at the entrance of coalmines, and here we are. There is a long line of God growing huge things from small faithfulness. Faith like a mustard seed! Noah was a drunk. Abraham was too old. Isaac was a daydreamer. Jacob was a liar. Lea was ugly. Joseph was abused. Moses was a murderer and he stuttered. Gideon was afraid. Samson was weak around women. Rehab was a prostitute. Jeremiah was unwilling. Timothy was too young. David had an affair and abused his power. Isaiah preached for I think three years naked. Try to appoint him to a church in this conference! Jonah ran from God. Job went bankrupt. Peter three times denied that he ever even met Jesus. Lazarus was dead.

Now, no more excuses. You can do something. When you remember that it is God who gives us power, you aren't the message, you, we, are the messengers. We did not earn our

citizenship in God’s kingdom. The glory, which is ours, is a gift. The sweetness which is ours engrafted into God’s kingdom is a gift. This church is not ours, but meant to be the place where our giftedness is played out, and where others first find the sweetness for their lives. Sometimes small things happen to change you from one of those parable birds just sitting and resting on the branch of the church to becoming an engrafted integral part of it, not just flitting in and out on Sunday, but staking your life, staking your soul on the truth of that tiny thing that was begun in Bethlehem, and then begun in earnest after the cross and ascension and Pentecost.

As the old preacher once said, and I heard him say, “God then got to work on making over this nasty old earth.” As we sit here, are we resting, enjoying the view from the outpost of God’s kingdom, or do we take, do we want to stake all of our lives on the truth that is small as it sometimes seems, as insignificant as it sometimes seems, as corrupt and cowardly as the church can sometimes be? Nonetheless, the kingdom of God is unstoppable, and we are part of it. Whether or not we water it, whether or not you attend, whether or not you stay and become engrafted or fly away when the going gets tough, nonetheless, God is doing a new thing, and this new thing, this new creation, this kingdom of God is unstoppable. If we as Main Street Church want to truly live out our destiny, we will stop believing that it is ours. This is God’s church, and citizenship in God’s kingdom is life, and all other roads and shiny things lead to emptiness and death. We are here for hope, and as an outpost of something the world has started to consider insignificant again, the kingdom of God, but it is all that will survive when everything else has fallen.

I’m going to date myself once again. Do any of you remember the old movie with George Burns and John Denver in it, “Oh, God?” I liked it. You may think it’s blasphemous, but I liked it. George Burns played God, and he tried to convince John Denver to tell people that he was still around, and he loved them, and he wanted them to love each other. It seemed as if nobody was listening. Everybody thought that Jerry, the character that John Denver played, was a flake, and in one of the final scenes, Jerry says, “We blew it,” but God says, “You never know, a seed here, a seed there, something will catch hold and grow.”

Do what you can, and remember God knows what you can do. Do what you can, and remember that God is the one who grants the growth. We’re not responsible for that. There are things to be done right here and now that may pay off later. We don’t really know what’s going to happen from this Brazil mission trip. Something amazing may happen years down the road.

David Mumson was a Lutheran from Denmark, who served as a missionary on the island of Sumatra in the late 1800s. He was there for 20 years, and he never saw a single convert to the Christian faith. While he was there, he translated the New Testament and he translated Luther’s Smaller Catechism into Sumatra, and finally, one of the cannibals on the island killed him before he ever saw anything good happen. During World War II, an American pilot crash-landed on that island. He saw the people running at him, some with spears in their hands. He was sure that he was going to be killed, but instead he discovered that these people were Lutheran Christians! Imagine! After Mumson’s death, after his death, an indigenous church sprang up out of the seeds of the New Testament translation and Luther’s

Smaller Catechism. 800,000 Lutherans grew from that. He didn't see it, but God gave it growth.

Not all growth is measured in size. All of us need to grow in maturity and spiritually and emotionally. That process is called sanctification, and we all need to grow. It means growth in faith over a lifetime. As a congregation, I'm pleased that we're growing in our commitment beyond our walls to mission. We're growing, and planting seeds of good news and God's love. We are growing in our willingness to share our resources with which God has blessed us. Do you realize over the past two years we have collected more in monetary gifts and tithes and pledges than ever in the history of Main Street? We are growing also in our relationship with each other, and we need to. We don't all know each other. God can grant that kind of growth, but it doesn't happen overnight. It's up to us to plant seeds, share our faith with someone, invite a neighbor; a kind word here and there can make such a difference. It seems like small things, but God uses small things. Even though we're only one person, with God's help, we can make a difference. We can make a difference in the life even of our wife or husband or family member or friend or maybe just somebody we meet and treat kindly. People flock to true kindness the same way a hummingbird sniffs out sweetness.

Today is Father's Day, and fathers should realize what a difference they can make in the lives of their children. They should also realize how the little things they do can mean so much. Just like a small seed that grows, our small acts have a big influence, some good, some bad, but little things mean a lot.

Brook Adams kept a diary from his boyhood. One special day when he was eight years old, he wrote down, "I went fishing with my father. It was the best day of my life." For the next forty years of his life, he never forgot that day, and he often referred to it. He commented how it influenced him. Now, Brook's father was an important man. He didn't have a lot of time. He was Charles Francis Adams, the U.S. Ambassador to Great Britain under the Lincoln administration. Now, interestingly, he also wrote in his diary about that fishing trip, but what he wrote was different. He said, "Went fishing with my son. A wasted day." Of course the day was not wasted! It may well have been one of the most well-spent days of his life.

You know, studies have shown that one of the biggest factors that determines if a child continues to be active in a worshiping church is whether or not his father attends worship. We may not always see the results of what we do right away, in fact, many of the things we do may not show visible results at all, but we have to be patient. God has shown a great deal of patience with us, and we know it. The text would encourage us to be patient people, who trust God to bring about the growth of the seeds of His word. Hummingbirds know where to find sweetness. I pray that we live in such ways that make Main Street a place where people flock to feed their souls on the kindness and the faith and the love and the hope that they find here because God has given it to us in our hearts, not just for us, but to share. Amen.