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**Spiritual Insights**  
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I always like it when Jesus talks about seeds and other things that pertain to gardens and growing things! For me, there's nothing like looking at seed catalogues before spring, telling myself that spring and summer surely will come again if I can just endure a few more months of snow and cold. Most years find me putting seeds in little containers and setting them in a window sill, because I just can't wait for the soil to be ready! Since I've been here in NY, I've learned that most gardeners purchase plants already up, getting them from various farmers' markets and such - because the growing season here doesn't lend itself to growing things from seed except for fast things like beans and squash, and short-season versions of crops farmers grow.

So I can picture Jesus talking about someone scattering seeds on the ground, and the miracle of how they just sprout and grow, and without our help...except for fertilizer, things to discourage bugs, weeding and so on. But the seeds themselves have the potential of the fully grown and fruiting plant within them - those little seeds that look dry and small and nothing like what the future plant will be. All of that potential just takes the nutrition of the soil, the rain and the sun - and its growth is unlocked. Then once it gets fully grown and has the grain formed in the head, or the tomatoes have turned red, or the beans look good, we go in and harvest. Yesterday at Dick Lacy's funeral, we read in 1 Corinthians about seeds, too - how a seed falls into the ground and dies - then is raised with a mysterious new life totally unlike the seed. The apostle Paul likens that to our death and burial in the ground, and the promise of resurrection into a new, incorruptible spiritual body.

The second teaching of Jesus is similar, in emphasizing how small a mustard seed is, and how big a shrub it can grow into - this is a middle eastern mustard, not like the mustard greens we grow. Jesus' mustard seed, small though it is, grows into a shrub big enough to provide shelter and comfort to all kinds of creatures.

As these are actually spiritual teachings, we need to unpack the visual, the illustration, and hear what Jesus is saying about the smallest actions, responses, or words that we do as we go about walking in the realm of God as Christ-followers. Jesus once commented that even the small action of a cup of water given in his name is a gift of ministry and faith. We could also consider the way we educate and help form the faith of the smallest and youngest among us, which we'll be reminded of over the next couple weeks as we have baptisms. We could also see the potential impact of even small congregations who may feel bad because they've not

become huge mega churches. Small, Jesus says, like small seeds, can be packed with importance and value, and shouldn't be despised. And the secret work of the Spirit in impacting and nurturing faith in people's hearts should not be overlooked, either. What the Spirit is able to do with the smallest seed is mysterious, and out of our control. Sometimes the result comes out a lot later.

That's one of the difficulties of being a pastor - the impact of my actions and words don't always seem to have an immediate effect. That's probably why I like practical things like gardening - the seeds come up, and some weeks later I have produce. I'm already eating my lettuce, and the sugar snap peas aren't far behind. I can see results faster and touchable, unlike my life work in ministry.

Because, you know, I have no idea what's bubbling in people's hearts as a result of what I try to say and do in ministry. Who knows what impact a simple act of kindness can have long-term? Who knows how our love and teaching of our congregation's children will lead to life decisions down the road, and help form a loving character for the next generation? Who knows what impact there may be from a decision to buy fair trade coffee beans from people in coffee-growing cooperatives around the world? Who knows what impact our actions of recycling will have, or our example of composing might have on the next generation? Who knows what our driving someone to their chemo and being a good friend will mean to them? Who knows what our acceptance of a minority person will mean down the road? Who knows what our small offerings will add up to and what good it will do, added together with everyone else's?

The Presbyterian Women have a national offering called Least Coin, which came about through a poor single mom who wanted to give, but didn't have much to spare. So she and her friends decided that every time they met together, they would contribute the least coin in their wallets, so no one felt unimportant. The idea caught on locally, and then nationally; and today the Least Coin offering from women's groups provides seed money (Seed!) for all kinds of ventures in mission. In the same way, the Hunger program of the national church has an offering called Nickel-a-Meal, where folks are invited to put a nickel into a collection box on their home table, every time they sit for a meal. The Hunger Program does great things with that collection of nickels.

This parable tells us to not despise small acts, daily words, a glass of water even, given in Christ's name. And not to despise the lunch a little child offered to Jesus, with which he fed over 5,000 people. Not to think less of our mission ideas and efforts even if we're not a mega church with lots of money.

I think of that cartoon of a beach filled with stranded starfish, and a little boy throwing them back in one at a time. A grown up comes by and kinda mocks the child's effort, saying that he'll never make a difference in the face of all these stranded starfish. As the child throws another one back, he says, "It makes a difference to this one."

A friend of mine who has spent her whole adult life working with the homeless in Norfolk, VA, told me about her life as a little girl. Growing up in a non-church & abusive family, she would put herself on a city bus to get to a certain church she'd heard of, and go to Sunday School by herself. I guess they accepted her despite the way she dressed or without parents, and taught her the stories of Jesus. For that hour or so every week, she was safe and loved. She is now among the most dedicated advocates for the homeless I've known, with a deep faith in God motivating her to work with some of the most difficult populations among us.

So I told this friend about a little girl who used to come to my Sunday School when I was young - don't know how she got there, we never knew her parents. You could tell she wanted to look good for Sunday School, even with her faded dress; and she or someone had put pin curls in her hair overnight, but she took the bobby pins out and left the hair all curled up all over her head. I guess she didn't know that she was supposed to brush it out into a style. I remember how awkward I felt around her, and how I didn't want to sit next to her; but at least I never teased her or said mean things, and the adults treated her well. My friend nodded, and said, "Yes, that was like me."

Seeds. The smallest words, acts, kindnesses, meeting an eye, remembering a name, and remembering how to pronounce different names; greeting visitors even though they look different from us, granting respect and worth to folks others might see as unworthy. Being there with words of faith in critical situations. They might not come and join our church the next week. They might not even say thank you sometimes. There might be no outer response to our words.

HOWEVER, the seed planted in the name of God has a power of its own, Jesus' parable tells us. The Holy Spirit is always working in people's inner self, or as we used to say, their heart. The Spirit is always nudging, bringing up a memory at the crucial time, helping that person hear the inner call, the pull of God on their self, calling their name in love. The seed grows, the mind ponders, things in life fan the sparks into life. Isaiah has God saying that God's words do not return empty - they accomplish their purpose.

It's God's job to nurture those seeds, those words, those acts. It's God's timing, God's schedule, God's work. God works in each soul personally, calling and wooing us to faith and

growth. God is working that way in each of us here, and in each one we, in turn, effect even in small ways.

I was talking with some pastor friends the other day, and we realized that many people don't seem to have a sense of mission or ministry for themselves, or perhaps don't recognize that even their small acts of love and kindness are a ministry. Many don't credit it that since they are following Christ, that they are gifted for ministry for helping complete the work of Christ. "I'm not a minister! I don't know enough, not good enough etc etc." But we each ARE ministers. Perhaps many don't credit their gifts with being important, or aren't used to looking at their works of love and kindness are indeed a call from the Spirit. Jesus' parables tell us to not overlook or despise even the smallest of good seeds!

The thing to ask ourselves is, what is my ministry? How am I serving? Don't belittle what you do - through the Holy Spirit, it has more impact than you can know. Some people seem to be chosen to organize great movements, or to start a new ministry that takes off. Most of us, though, minister where we are and how we can. We send cards or call the sick; we take a casserole to a neighbor having a tough time; we say kind words to our neighbors and their kids; we hold a door for a person with their arms full; we pick up groceries for a friend; we drive someone to the hospital for treatment; we smile at the checkout person and say their name; we carry string cheese to give to folks begging on street corners; we talk to the person no one is talking to. We might even tell someone how much it means to us to have the church around us, and how God was with us during our own tragedy. It doesn't take much to plant a seed.

This week, let's be aware of how often our loving attitude, thanks to God first loving us, moves us to do even these small seed deeds - I like that, "seed deeds." May this be a week of seed deeds of ministry, each and every one of us. AMEN!