

## THE PAULING EFFECT

Mark 4:26He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. 27Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. 28All by itself the soil produces grain--first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. 29As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come." 30Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? 31It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. 32Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade." 33With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. 34He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

Growth. From tiny to tremendous. From itty bitty seed to monstrous plant. Jesus tells the story, in our text, about the power of the mustard seed to grow to dramatic proportions. It starts out small and seemingly insignificant, but when planted and nourished, the mustard plant can become amazingly huge and incredibly vibrant.

Of course Jesus isn't really talking about the mustard plant here. This is a parable. He's talking about the innate ability of the Spirit of God to build to blossom the very tiny seed of faith into something that transforms a person's whole being – something that can shape and mold every single day in the life of the individual who is so blessed.

And you know this beautiful, mature faith when you see it. The person just glows with the light of God's love as go about their daily work. It has been my privilege, as a pastor, to get to see this in action among many. People who think with their faith and who view every waking moment through the eyes of the God whom they serve. They want to transform their landscape, and they are willing to take the brush God gives them and start painting away.

One woman, in particular, stands out to me as I think about this kind of faith. Her name is Linda and, for the 33 years that I have known her, her eyes are always looking outside herself at the ways God might enable her to use her gifts and talents.

When I first met her, she had joined a church that had some weaknesses musically. Now Linda had never been a trained musician, but she said, "Hey, I know a little bit about music. I'd be willing to meet with people and plan to sing songs." Next thing you know she is leading a choir. And the people she's gathered are having fun serving the Lord. She's helped them see that they are part of a bigger picture in helping the church to worship God in a new a meaningful

way. Was she the best choir director ... I doubt it. Did she help a congregation develop into a people who saw how they could use their voices to serve the Lord. Yes.

Some years later, as a person who had a passion for family tree research, Linda had been corresponding with distant relatives in Poland. As she had this contact, she discovered much about one family's poverty and their meager knowledge about the Gospel. So, it became her project, over the next few years, to motivate her extended family to help contribute to the needs of this family and to also, as she forwarded gifts and messages of love, to use that as an opportunity to share about the Savior who motivated this generosity.

Over the course of a few years, Linda made a lot of headway – and now, some twenty plus years later we can see much of the fruit of the seeds Linda sowed among this family. The children have grown and have been well-educated and become prosperous. And the family writes and talks in ways that evidence that their faith in Christ.

Then there were the quilts. Linda amassed a group of women who loved to get together to sew. So Linda managed to use their sewing for mission. She got her women to meet every Wednesday, spend a little time in the Word of God, and then to make lap quilts for Lutheran World Relief to be shared with the poor throughout the world. The numbers of quilts that her women's group has mailed out has been phenomenal. And all the women know that their labors have accomplished good work for Jesus.

I could give you countless other examples in the life of Aunt Linda Pauling. The woman is an unbelievably beautiful example of how the small mustard seed grew and has blessed the world.

But I want to suggest to you how this happened in her life. To do so, I want to create an image for you. I want you to think of Linda's young mind as a forest. Can you picture a forest: tree after tree, bush after bush, meadow after meadow. Now here's what happened. As she fed on the stories and truths of Jesus, as she was immersed in His self-sacrificial love that paid the price for all sin by giving beyond measure, it began to create a path in her forest. You know how it is, paths are formed by continual usage – the more people walk over the same ground again and again, the more it gets tropped down and becomes the way people go.

For Linda, the Word of God created neurological pathways in her mind that enabled her to see every action in her life as a part of God's mission – as a part of God's way to use her as His instrument.

I get emails from Aunt Linda regularly. And they are always an encouragement. They might include a prayer request. They might highlight a mission endeavor that she thinks is effective. They might talk about another family member who is serving the Lord. They might discuss a recent devotion she read. But they always show a heart whose single-minded passion is to serve the Lord and to bless the people she encounters with the joy of Jesus.

I bet some of you know someone like this, don't you? These kind of people reflect the love of Jesus in their jobs, in their free time, in their service projects, in their families. They are bright beacons of light who shine with Christ's love.

Wouldn't you like to be one of those people? Wouldn't you like to have such a pathway in your brain that transforms every landscape – every day? I know I would. And not just because I'm a pastor and it's my job to be compassionate and to encourage mission and ministry, but because that's the way God has transformed my mind.

I can truly say God is working on me – that His Word is creating those pathways regularly. But I also know I am a work in progress.

I see it in you too. I love to hear the stories of how you transform your world with the love of Jesus that the Spirit has worked in you. Beth DeJongh, I love how you've created the Service Club for our Sunday School kids and how you bless your students at Concordia. Roger Reetz, I love how you have made our congregation more efficient in the way we allocate our financial resources, how you've beautified the church by dedicating yourself to outdoor plantings, how you encourage our young people by talking to them praying for them. Tom Daub, I love how you are willing to take Lila to so many places, how you help lead an Upper Room group so that people can grow in faith, how you offer your time to go to Conventions, to pick up the elderly, to serve people at a time of loss. Wendy Seaman, I love how you are there in personal ministry to people going through a hard time. I love how you have a passion to help kids learn about Jesus. I love how you are willing to give your time and talent to most any area of need that God's people might have here at BSLC or beyond. Those are just a few examples.

Unfortunately, I worry about modern society in this regard, because I see how the modern wiring is changing. Social media and the internet have radically transformed the way the pathways are being formed in the brain. Materialism and selfishness are carving out channels that not only transform the way we think, but also have effect on the way our kids are trained. And the net out is that the video game, the incessant picture posting, the body image stuff, the popularity can easily become the new algorithm for the mind.

This, my friends, is the work of the Tempter. He is using every tool at his disposal to try and carve out different pathways, different channels so that God's Word lies dormant, God's mission goes undone, and so that we become self-centered, lazy, materialistic, naval-gazers who might talk about making a difference but who never actually lift a finger to do it and who may also display patterns for our kids that lead them away from the Savior's arms and into the ways of the world. So often my students have mastered school, but are weak in their knowledge of God's saving acts. So often I see families who are majorly into sports, but whose relationship to God seems to be sagging. So often I see preened lawns, but untrained souls.

Jesus came to change all that. His work on the cross blasted through the wall of sin and death and opened the channel for His Omnipotent strength, His incredible love, His unlimited compassion to flow through us.

As we immerse ourselves in the pages of His word and remember the incredible stories of His grace, He creates new pathways in our minds too. And soon, as He moves in us, we find ourselves transforming the landscape around us.

So, my friends, pick up your paintbrush and paint with the beauty of God's love wherever you go. With your kids. At work. In the church. With your friends. As a servant. In your families.

And someday when you are gone, people will look back and say, "Wow! How beautiful is the heart of Him who is filled with God's Spirit."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.