

"Seed Parables" – Mark 4:26-34 – June 17, 2018
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Today as we visit the gospel of Mark we encounter Jesus in the midst of teaching his disciples and the people who had gathered to listen to him. Jesus often taught using metaphors and parables, picking simple, everyday subjects that the people could understand. The parables are used as comparisons, to either show how things are alike or how they are dissimilar. While they may utilize simple items or subjects, the parables are not always easy to decipher, and even for his followers, Jesus often had to explain what the parables meant. Unlike the gospels of Matthew and Luke, which contain many parables, Mark's gospel contains very few. Today we encounter two of them. In them, Jesus is describing how the kingdom or reign of God will look.

The subject Jesus uses for these two parables is seeds, and he is using the image of seeds to describe how the reign of God will grow and spread as the gospel message is shared. The first parable is interesting – not so much in its content, because it actually is rather boring, one commentator likened it to an elementary school science book – there is no drama in it – seeds are planted, the farmer goes about his business, and though he doesn't really know how or why, but not surprisingly, the seeds sprout and grow into plants and, in short order, are ready to be harvested. That's the parable. Nothing too interesting there. What makes this parable interesting is that it is only found in Mark's gospel, which was written first. Neither Luke nor Matthew chose to repeat it in their gospels. Probably because they too found it boring.

So what does it tell us? It tells us, that the reign of God is going to grow and produce fruit despite our attention to it or inattention to it. The reign of God is not dependent on us. According to Jesus, the seeds have been sown and it will take root and grow. Hold that thought – I will come back to it.

The second parable is at least a bit more subjectively interesting. Jesus tells about how this tiny little seed, the mustard seed, will sprout into, what he calls, the mightiest of shrubs. So strong and plentiful are its branches, that the birds of the air will come to make their nests within them and find shade from the sun. Not only that, the mustard plant was also useful for its medicinal purposes. Here's a plant that is useful in both form and function. What a magnificent little seed!

But here's the joke. In Jesus' time, no one would plant a mustard seed. This particular plant was very common and very prolific. In fact, left on its own, it had a tendency to take over wherever it grew. Yes, it was a useful plant, but it could be a bit of a nuisance. As I was trying to come up with an equivalent plant familiar to us, I thought of strawberries or raspberries. It seems like every year around this time I hear of people in the church or in my neighborhood thinning out and trying to get rid of their extra strawberry or raspberry plants. Their berries are quite tasty, but apparently, if you leave them to their own devices, they will spread throughout your garden and yard.

So then what is the meaning of the parable, now that we get the idea of what a mustard plant is really like? The kingdom or reign of God is like the tiny mustard seed. Why did Jesus use this plant as

his example, rather than use something like what we had in the passage from Ezekiel that Katherine read? He could have compared the reign of God to the mighty cedar trees of Lebanon. Talk about an impressive specimen of plant!

But instead, the parable Jesus uses gives us the image of the reign of God as being like a seed that produces an ordinary plant that has a proclivity to spread and that will eventually take over. Imagine that. The kingdom of God coming in like a tiny, common mustard seed, perhaps dropped by a bird onto a landscape, growing into a large bush, producing more seeds and slowly spreading until it takes over the land. Is it too much of a good thing? Is it a nuisance? Not to the birds who come to make their nests in its branches. The reign of God will come in and bit by bit, slowly spread its influence.

New Testament professor Matt Skinner wrote, "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." http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3676

So let's look at these two parables together. In the first we have the image of the reign of God as seeds scattered that will grow without our need to interfere or help the process along. In the second we see the reign of God coming in, and left unchecked and unhindered, will eventually fill the landscape with its produce.

These parables tell us that the reign of God, the message of the gospel will continue, grow, and flourish with or without our help. We are not necessary. The coming of Jesus Christ set in motion the plan of salvation - for God's kingdom to grow and thrive. The creation has waited for its redemption, and in Christ that redemption has begun.

As I was thinking about these parables and what I might say to you today, I was also thinking about the headlines in the news, the state of affairs in our nation, the divisiveness, the anger and frustration, the ongoing struggles throughout the world. I thought about children who don't speak English, who have traveled hundreds of miles on journey they don't understand, and who have been taken from the parents' arms. I thought about the daily stories that are coming out of the #metoo movement – stories of women who have endured sexual harassment, sexual assault or abuse. I thought about world leaders who smile into the camera lens, are praised by some for their goodness, yet who go home to a nation that knows only fear, hunger and violence. I thought about people who seem to possess everything in life to make them happy but who have died by suicide.

And I thought about how that makes me feel. And how it makes others feel. I thought about all the words I have heard or read of the frustrations and the fears and the concerns of so many people

from all walks of life. And wondering when it will get better. When people will put aside their hatred and their fear of "the other."

And then I read these parables and am given hope. We don't have to do it all. The kingdom of God does not flourish or fail based upon our own strength. Our own wills. Our own actions. God has a plan of redemption for all creation, for all people. That plan has been set into motion.

We can breathe. We can hope. And we can do our part. But we can trust that God's reign is here. It may not yet be fully realized. But it is here. Thanks be to God.