

Pastor Jon's Sermon from Sunday, June 13, 2021

Text: Mark 4:26-34.

“A meal of plant-based parables”

I built a raised bed garden in our back yard this year. I am so excited about this. Can you tell? I can't wait to taste that fresh produce. In the middle of the garden I planted spinach, beets, and carrots. But for some reason, even after the chicken wire fence went up, a thief comes in the night and digs up some of the most vulnerable plants...the spinach, beets and carrots. It's unnerving. I go outside every morning to do the garden stare for about 10 minutes with my coffee in hand. Then I saw other plants covered in dirt... a sign that the little thief was there. Then I see uprooted plants. Gardening takes a lot of patience and letting go of control. You can experience loss and disappointment... like in life. But, for those plants that make it to harvest and produce what they were made for, it is pure joy to eat and share.

In our Gospel for today from Mark 4, we have a steady diet of plant-based parables. To a mostly agrarian audience this makes sense. Jesus is taking something that is hard and mysterious to understand... the kingdom of God...and puts it alongside something people do understand... seeds and farming. I like to define the Kingdom of God as the reign of God or the dream of God for our world.

In the first of two seed parables, the one tending the field has no idea how the crop grows. And like us, we don't fully understand kingdom of God Jesus came to bring to earth grows. The emergence of God's kingdom is beyond both our full understanding and control. But it comes, nevertheless. Luther's explanation of the petition... “Thy kingdom come” in the Small Catechism... in the Lord's Prayer goes like this: “In fact, God's kingdom comes on its own without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come to us. **How does this come?** Whenever our heavenly father gives us the Holy Spirit, so that through the Holy Spirit's grace we believe God's holy word and live godly lives here in time and hereafter in eternity.” We received the Holy Spirit in our baptism and it continues to mold us and shape us into kingdom people.

The church can do nothing to hasten the kingdom – we can learn about God’s dream for the world, we can live godly lives, and we can sow seeds of the kingdom, mark the progress, and prepare for harvest. But in the midst of all that, we are to wait patiently, night and day. The farmer in the story would sleep and rise night and day and the seed would sprout and grow... but he didn’t know how.

Next, we realize that we can’t rush the harvest. We can’t produce or regulate God’s kingdom. I realized this when I went to seminary. “Semin” means “seed” in Latin. So a seminary is “a seed planting factory.” Students learn how to plant seeds of the faith. One parent said this week in Bible study, “I don’t worry about my adult children’s faith. We did the best we could and have to trust that God will do the rest.”

Next, there is an ecological import in this parable. Did you notice how important the ground is? This parable is more about the ground than the seed. The ground produces of itself... “Automate” in the original Greek. Therefore, we must pay attention to the ground... to the earth. We need to care for the earth and let it rest from the stress we put on it.

What does this short parable tell us about God and us?

We are the sowers... but it is God who gives the growth. We can spread the seed and watch it grow, but it is not our work that makes it sprout and mature.

I find this very freeing and gracious that we don’t make the seeds grow. I think sometimes we think we can control someone’s growth in the faith. All we can do is try to model the faith and wait.

Jesus reminds us that we can’t bring about the Kingdom on our time schedule and through our effort. Jesus is saying that the kingdom will grow... though it cannot be rushed or forced.

For those who hear this parable, there is a great comfort. This is not a parable of frantic work to somehow attain the kingdom. There are times of rest, patience, and waiting. We just have to plant, wait, and harvest.

Then we get to the parable of the mustard seed... a more well-known parable. Big things come from tiny beginnings. "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." A Chinese proverb. To my son who tore his ACL. Hang in there. Every bit of strengthening you do will help in the long run as we wait for eventual surgery.

Another example is "Our Faith in Action" building campaign adopted the image of a mustard seed for our building expansion. Look at us now. A little seed of vision and hope turned into a beautiful building and no mortgage. Our Savior's is accessible to all and a place of rest and shade for all types birds like us.

When I was in Oregon, wild mustard produced beautiful yellow flowers on the side of the roads. However, it was considered a noxious weed. A seed 1 millimeter in diameter produced a shrub that could grow 10 feet high. So in Mark's Gospel, Jesus chooses the image of a spreading shrub for the kingdom he came to bring. And the thing that makes a shrub spread is after it flowers, seeds, and dries, the seeds are spread by the wind and birds. There really is no control over this process unless we harvest the seeds ourselves and plant them.

How disappointing it might have been to hear Jesus teach about his reign on earth as a mustard shrub that will eventually grow when the conditions are right. What about a giant cedar like in the Ezekiel text for today?

But isn't this the way... the way Jesus came to be among us. Our Messiah, who was born in a manger... didn't meet the expectations of a messiah coming with power and might to battle the Roman Empire. Jesus was identified by lowliness, meekness, and humility... like a mustard seed. His tree is a cross... another unlikely symbol of the kingdom of God.

Brothers and Sister's in Christ, God's work will be done. God's kingdom will flourish. No matter what storms, thieves in the night, chaos, or violence enter our world, God's kingdom is breaking in, even as we speak. It will be fulfilled when Jesus returns. In the meantime, Jesus promises a place for rest and peace for all in his church. Amen!