



“Astonishing”
Scripture – Mark 4:26-34
Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, June 17, 2018

Frequently in the gospels, we read that Jesus exhorts those who follow him to live a particular way – to be compassionate like a Good Samaritan – to treat others the way we want to be treated – to remove the log from our own eye before we attempt to remove the speck from another’s eye – not to shut the door of our heart like the rich man who ignored the poor man at his gate.

However, in this morning’s two parables featuring seeds, Jesus does not instruct us on how to live. No moral teaching here. Instead he describes the kingdom of God – how it spreads and how it can expand beyond our most vivid imagination.

When Jesus described God’s kingdom, he generally talked about this life, not the next. The kingdom of God is when justice, mercy, and peace rule the day. That is precisely the hope we express each time we pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” We are praying, “May our world become the beautiful and life-enriching place God dreams for it to become.” Yet how the kingdom takes root, how it spreads, what impact it has, and how we can spot it and engage it is not easily understood. So Jesus told stories.

Two back-to-back parables about seeds pull back the curtain to reveal prominent characteristics of the kingdom. To help us decipher them, it will be best if we slip into the dusty sandals of the first disciples and try to imagine their limited view of the world. They were modest in number and not one held an influential position. They were uneducated, working class Jews whose homeland was occupied by the greatest power the earth had ever witnessed. The Romans controlled their lives through fear and intimidation, and a back-breaking tax system that kept them subservient.

When they gazed at their world and considered current conditions, it must have been stifling. Just to rise out of bed each morning and do what was necessary to survive required a tenacious spirit. To dream about a better day verged on the absurd. No better days were coming. The die had been cast. So, Jesus told parables to burst open their tunnel vision and to expand their horizon.

In our first parable, Jesus says there is an unseen power at work in the world. He says to anyone who will listen, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.’ There is an unseen power in the world that can transform a seed into a plant. Even in our day

with our breadth of botanical knowledge about the processes of growth, it is still incredible to think that a minute seed can become a plant or a bush or a tree.

Of course, his parable was no biology lesson, but a metaphor. Things from the disciples' everyday world – seeds and farming – illustrated the fact that there is an unseen power in the world that spurs growth.

While many look at the world and see it as it is, Jesus had a unique ability to look at the world and see it as it could be. Jesus taught that God is like someone who sows seeds, casting out possibilities of what can be. Those seeds that take root in us germinate for a while; and if we do not discard them, they can evolve into something new.

However, that invisible power can do more than help us broaden our perspective and envision new possibilities. It can help us weather storms that blow into our lives; and some of you are embroiled in the tempest today.

If you grieve the loss a loved one, there is an invisible power that can bring healing to your life and pave the way for joy to return. If you are in the midst of a nightmare, there is a power that can give you the courage to endure it. If you are facing a severe test, there is a power that can give you the strength to survive it. If you are assailed by temptation, there is a power that can help you reject it. Over the years, I have seen it countless times.

How that power works is beyond our grasp, but countless people have turned to God and discovered a force that helped them overcome what they thought would overwhelm them. On their own, they may not have made it. Even with the support of others, they may have been crushed. But God infused them with what they needed to weather the storm. Like the unseen power that coaxes a seed buried in the earth to sprout and become a plant, the liberating love of God can lift you from darkness to light.

Jesus wants to highlight another aspect of the kingdom, so a second parable follows on the heels of the first. “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

This second parable about the kingdom claims that great things can result from the smallest beginning.

Do you know the story of Martha Berry? She was born in 1865, and grew up in Rome, Georgia. Her father became a successful businessman and acquired a vast amount of real estate. She was educated by a governess and tutors at home and spent less than a year in a finishing school in Baltimore.

Martha's father was a devout Christian with a generous heart and, as a teenager, she would ride horseback with him into the nearby mountain areas, where he would visit with poor landowners and tenant farmers. He often assisted these families with their needs. As she watched her father, the seed of compassionate Christianity was planted in Martha's heart.

One Sunday in her early thirties, Martha met three young boys who were crossing the family's property. She learned they did not go to school and knew nothing about the Bible. So she began to tell them some of the basic Bible stories. They were enthralled, so she invited them to come back the next Sunday with their brothers and sisters. Soon whole families filled the small log cabin her father had built for Martha and her siblings as a childhood playhouse.

When the group outgrew the cabin, she built a small school building located on the 83 acres of land her father had given her. Other deprived children a few miles away yearned for an education, so Martha started a Sunday

school in an abandoned church near them. She found another building at Mount Alto and another at Foster's Bend, and these four Sunday schools grew into day schools.

Eventually Martha decided that to have a sufficient impact on the children, she needed to keep them at the schools, so she had a dormitory built. On January 13, 1902, she opened the Boys' Industrial School with five boarding students on land near her home. After the school was incorporated the next year with a board of trustees, she deeded the 83-acre tract to the school. Six years later, on Thanksgiving Day 1909, she opened the Martha Berry School for Girls a mile from the boys' school.

The Berry schools became models for vocational, agricultural and mechanical schools throughout the world by demonstrating how the needs of people in poor rural areas could be met.

In 1926 she established Berry Junior College and four years later it became a thriving four-year college. Today, Berry College has the world's largest contiguous college campus, spanning more than 27,000 acres of meadows, woodlands and streams. There are 47 buildings on the primary campus and it has become a well-regarded private liberal arts school. Last year the school provided more than \$36 million in financial aid to its students.¹

A mustard seed – the size of the head of a pin – can grow into an immense bush. Similarly, every great idea, every major project, every transforming movement began as a tiny thought. But somehow they caught hold and grew to immense proportions. The kingdom of God is like that. It began with a penniless young teacher who gathered a few followers around him during his brief lifetime. He commissioned them to change people's lives by planting seeds of God's love. They could not have imagined that their humble actions in the shadows of a mighty pagan empire would lead to a faith that circles the globe and impacts millions of lives each day.

Truly astonishing.

NOTES

1. The information on Martha Berry and the schools she created comes from the website of Berry College.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Gracious God, on this day when we remember our fathers, stepfathers, grandfathers or any man who played the role of father for us, we express our gratitude for all they did that was right and true and good. We are grateful for their love that expressed itself: in providing a home for us, in caring for us when we were unable to care for ourselves, for disciplining us when we risked hurting ourselves or others, and for showing us solid values by which to live.

We are deeply grateful for the ways they encouraged us to do our best, for challenging us when we needed a push, for backing away when we put pressure on ourselves and for celebrating our accomplishments.

Forgiving God, we also pause to forgive our fathers for the mistakes they made;

for the times they were too impatient,
for the times they lost control of their anger,
and for the times they failed to provide the guidance we needed.

We forgive them for their human frailties and pray that our loved ones will also forgive us for not being perfect. We who are fathers, stepfathers, and grandfathers pray that we may discern your guidance and become more patient, wise, and loving as we carry out our fatherly roles.

Generous God, as we begin International Refugee Week, we pray for the tens of millions of people who have been forced to flee their homes because violence has arrived at their doorstep. Many have no alternative but to risk the lives of their families to escape the danger that has encroached upon them. May they find a safe haven where they can care for one another, find a degree of stability, and make the best of their new normal.

We pray for those who are now living in overcrowded camps where food is scarce and sanitation is inadequate. May they soon find a more hospitable place to live, work and care for their children as people of goodwill seek to improve their plight.

Inspiring God, you hold up the dream that one day nation will not lift up sword against nation and people will learn to dwell together in peace. We pray for leaders throughout the world who will go the second and third miles in seeking diplomatic solutions to disagreements, and only resort to war when every other avenue has been exhausted.

Eternal God, until that day when peace finally rules, we pray that our hearts not harden against those whose lives hang in a precarious balance. May the words “Not my problem” be banished from our minds as we remember the ties that bind all people together. May your Spirit continue to transform our hearts and minds so that we will treat refugees the way we would hope to be treated if war forced us to flee our home.

Mighty God, grant us the will to overcome evil with good, and to bring an end to terrorism, violence and oppression, so that all people may enjoy the benefits of freedom and have the opportunity to live in peace. And whenever we pray “Thy kingdom come, they will be done,” may we show that we genuinely mean it by partnering with you in nudging the world nearer its reality. Now, hear us as we *earnestly* pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, saying, “Our Father...”