



“Plant Seeds”

Scripture – Mark 4:26-34

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, June 23, 2024

If you peruse the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, you quickly discover that Jesus was a master storyteller who employed parables to arouse the imagination. And if you catalogue each of his parables in these gospels, how many do you think you will find? Twenty-five? Do I hear 30? Anyone go for 35? How about 40?

Diligent digging will actually unearth 41 parables. Jesus dropped them on listeners to startle, to reveal, and to prompt them to rethink tired ideas. Most of his parables were directed at answering this pivotal question: What is the kingdom of God – or reign of God – like? That is, what is God’s dream for the world?

We pray for it every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.” But, do we know for what we are praying?

New Testament scholar Alyce McKenzie has spent years studying the parables of Jesus and she has concluded that his parables offer four basic answers to the question: ‘What is the kingdom of God like?’

1. The kingdom of God is not under our control.
2. The kingdom of God often shows up where we least expect it.
3. The kingdom of God disrupts business as usual.
4. The kingdom of God is a reign of justice and mercy.¹

Although we feel compelled to manage every aspect of our lives, the kingdom of God can take root without us. We need to be awake or we might miss it. It can change our perspective and reorient our lives. And it can spur us to actions that are just and merciful.

Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai who lived in the second century told this parable: “It is like men who were sitting in a ship. One took a drill and began boring beneath his own place. His fellow travelers said to him: ‘What are you doing?’ He said to them: ‘What does that matter to you? Am I not drilling under my own place?’ They said: ‘Because the water will come up and flood the ship for us all.’²

This parable reminds us that our actions have repercussions. One person can cause suffering for many – think of some of our world leaders. We hope such a parable would prompt us to ask ourselves: Do my words and actions inflict harm or promote healing?

Today's Scripture reading is brief, but in these nine verses Jesus tells two crisp parables about the way God's realm spreads on earth. Both parables tease out a scene in our minds to help us grasp different facets of God's activity in the world.

The first parable paints a picture like this: God's kingdom is like a seed that a man flings on the ground and then goes home and crawls into bed. Yet, after some days, he spies something happening. The seed begins to sprout and grow. He wonders how it happens but has no idea. He simply marvels at the miracle. First, there is a stalk, later a bud, and eventually, the ripened grain. Amazing! From tiny seeds to an abundant harvest, and the person who planted the seeds does not grasp how it happens.

In his parable, Jesus is revealing a vital truth: There is a hidden power at work in the world. This unseen power can transform a seed into a plant.

Even in our day with our extensive botanical knowledge about the processes of growth, it is still incredible to think that a minute seed can become a large plant with lush summer tomatoes; or something small enough to fit in the palm of your hand can become a mighty oak.

Of course, Jesus was not teaching freshman level botany. He was utilizing the wonder of growth as a metaphor. Jesus used a common activity – planting seeds – to illustrate the fact that there is an invisible power in the world that spurs growth.

To be sure, the sower in Jesus' parable is not a mere bystander. First, he takes an initiative and plants something that has the potential to grow. But more importantly, he trusts that a power beyond himself will spur positive growth.

This first parable tells us that, whether we can detect it or not, God works with the seeds that we scatter to expand God's realm on earth. The second parable builds on the first. It claims that astonishing things can result from small beginnings. Again, using a story about a seed and its growth, Jesus says the kingdom of God "is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of seeds; 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 parable claims that God can take the miniscule and produce the momentous. If only we were aware that each sentence we utter and each action we take has repercussions. This parable suggests that God works alongside our efforts to produce something good.

God works for good in all situations, but rarely performs a solo act. God partners with each of us to nudge the world in a better direction. And why did Jesus choose a mustard seed that grows into a bush to draw his illustration? Why not point to a towering cedar? Perhaps Jesus was driving home the point that God's kingdom is not limited to the grand and impressive, but often takes root and grows as a result of the faithful and generous actions of our ordinary lives.

A few years ago, when COVID was raging and everyone was wearing a mask, Tom Long slipped into the grocery store for a few items and ran into a friend who “runs a social service ministry out of an old gas station. He and volunteers converted the building into a cafe where they serve lunch at nearly giveaway prices in order to serve a low-income clientele. Customers who cannot pay are fed at no charge. A hand lettered sign at the counter reads: “We basically want to feed people, so we are asking folks to pay what they want. Our base cost is \$8 per meal. If you’ve got it, great. If not, no worries. If you have a little more and want to help us feed those who don’t have it, then so much the better.” The cooks, servers, and other staff are all drawn from those in town experiencing homelessness or recovering from addiction. They are learning on the job and when the inevitable mistakes and stumbles happen, the staff are not scolded or fired but gently taught. The goal being the development of lasting work skills.”

“Tom asked how the café had been doing during the health crisis and he shook his head and said, ‘The first month we lost 75% of our business. As you know, we operate on a shoestring anyway, and common sense would have dictated that we close the doors until this is over. But this is the worst time to stop feeding the hungry, so we decided to double down. In addition to lunch, we started serving a full dinner on a ‘pay what you can basis.’”

Tom asked, “How did you fund it?”

He responded, “We didn’t have the funds to support it, but folks needed food, and we just did it on faith. People around town started hearing about it. Lots of them were hurting too, but a number of folks came in the café and signed over their coronavirus government stimulus checks so that we could feed the hungry. It wasn’t a lot of money, but we made it work. Last month we fed 430 people.”

A woman standing nearby overheard their conversation and said, “My husband and I help out at the café some, but mostly we’re really busy with our kids. We’ve raised twenty children.”

“Twenty children!” Tom said, “You’re foster parents!”

“No,” she replied, “We adopted the kids. My husband is retired military. We have his pension and lots of free time, and we just felt that God wanted us to take into our home and our family kids that nobody else would have; and that’s what we’ve done. Twenty so far.”

“There he was standing beside the potatoes in the Food Lion, and watching that mustard plant grow and grow and the branches reach out farther and farther. According to Jesus, the kingdom doesn’t look all that impressive at first, sort of like the smallest of seeds – an abandoned gas station or a couple on a military pension – but when all is said and done, it grows into a most welcoming plant that gathers into its embrace of care, love, and protection all of God’s precious creatures.”³

Plant seeds even if you don’t know how or if they will produce anything. You are not the only power at work here. God can work with your small efforts – a word of encouragement, a listening ear, a just cause to support, an act of generosity. And keep your eyes peeled, because the kingdom may surprisingly appear in the midst of the ordinary and knock you over with surprise.

NOTES

1. Alyce M. McKenzie, *The Parables for Today*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p. 3.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
3. Tom Long, *Proclaiming the Parables: Preaching and Teaching the Kingdom of God*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2024), p. 87-88.

Prayers of the People ~ Minion K. C. Morrison, June 23, 2024

Dear God, we come now, our visages brightened by the light, sounds and smells of summer. How marvelous it is to again reach this annual phase of joy, levity, and sometimes abandon. Oh, how we marvel at the magic of the coming and going of these seasons, reminding us again of the natural order of things. The awesome wonder of this season sometimes leaves us without speech—finding no words to mark the favor of this season of joy. You promised us this joy and may we always be enveloped in it. Guide us in using it to smile, to assert its presence to random people we encounter, in random places as we go about our daily lives. To this end inspire us to spread our joy so that we create a melody of voices of every language, every culture to generate that joyful noise you commanded.

Dear God, we know that our joys are interposed by sorrow—sickness, death, hurt, shame. Our joys are also sometimes blinded by the disorders wrought by personal and family conflict, or by ineffective discernment regarding distressing issues in school and church life. Then, there are the risks and costs that test our joys in the social and political communities of which we are members—differentials of power; failure of institutions; and the deep shame in the inhumane conditions to which too many of our human family are rendered.

We beseech you, dear God, to give us the power to both exude our personal joy, and to deploy it in the furtherance of community; to live in such a joyful manner that none will have less; that the sick will be tended; that the state will be held accountable; that the shame of the naked and unhoused will be obliterated. Give us the courage to exercise tough joy—rising every morning, grateful to be in our right minds, and making a commitment to act in consonance with our joy to sustain humanity: witnessing in the style of Jesus.

We ask, dear God as we enter the brightness of summer, that we spread its natural joys and hopes to families enduring the routine pangs of daily living: the losses of death, family dissolution, sickness, incarceration, or any of a hundred other disruptions. Guide us as Westminster parishioners to generously spread our joy to alleviate these struggles in our local community.

Then there are the challenges of our wider world. We live in a moment when there are wars and rumors of wars; ethnic and religious conflicts; and an ever-decreasing perspective for discernment one to another. Oh, dear God we beg your mercy and your intervention to inspire in us the will to exercise the full measure of our tough, joyful witness to answer these calls for peace, justice, and reconciliation.

And as always, under your care and guidance, when we have refocused and repurposed our joy, let us utter the words you taught us to pray: **Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.**