

Mark 4:26-34

4:26 He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground,

4:27 and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.

4:28 The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.

4:29 But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

4:30 He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?

4:31 It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth;

4:32 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."

4:33 With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it;

4:34 he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Creeper Grass

When Jacqueline and I were living in Charlotte, our front lawn was full of creeper grass. The previous owners told us that this “Lazy Man’s” grass was perfect, because when it gets really hot in the summer, it’s got strong enough roots not to burn up. And as the grass grows longer, it creeps out, rather than shooting up. That means it won’t be horribly unkempt if you miss a Saturday lawn mowing or two. What they didn’t tell us is that creeper grass is the first grass to turn brown in the fall, and the last to turn green in the spring.

And about the middle of April every year, we would notice that our neighbors’ yards looked healthy and green, and ours looked like it missed the memo that that a new season had arrived. And admittedly, we failed to fertilize, or put down preventatives, or lift one finger to help it along. But wouldn’t you know it, along came June, and our grass would turn green, and lush, and thick and high, and not as lazy as we would have hoped for it to be.

And I’m not a farmer, but I sure can relate to our first parable, because somehow, some way, grass seeds germinate, and they gauge the proper temperature, and they sprout in the form of strong, green blades. And I don’t have a sickle, but I do have a mower, and I have seen many harvests of green grass, ready for somersaults, and three energetic little girls, and all kinds of summer fun. And even though I never saw that grass growing, working, preparing for a new season – it was!!! And Jesus tells us that God’s kingdom, or God’s kin-dom is working in the same way. It may not feel so pronounced, we may not even notice it happening, but the harvest is coming.

Mustard Seeds

We hear about mustard seeds, too. Remember this isn't a scientific parable, so there's a bit of room for exaggeration. The mustard seed may not be the smallest of all seeds, but it is very tiny, and if it was much smaller, you'd need a microscope to examine it. And yes, arborists and Discovery Channel watchers, you would be hard pressed to find a mustard tree taller than six feet. And it's really a bush or shrub, not a tree. And while a bird could certainly rest in its branches, its branches would not be large enough for nesting. But don't get so bogged down in details!

Jesus is describing something very tiny, that is going to grow in an enormous way. And remember this is the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. And he's saying, "The world that I'm seeking to bring about right now may appear kind of small, but I promise you, it's something that's taking root, and it's gonna grow exponentially."

Two parables. Two key kin-dom insights. The kin-dom is at work, even if you don't see it. And it's a kin-dom that's going to keep growing.

Secrets?

The last two verses of our lection tell us that Jesus uses his parables in a kind of mysterious, coded way. Jesus tells large audiences about God's kin-dom in a veiled way, but explains it in more detail to the disciples. I don't agree with the author of Mark here. I don't believe Jesus is being intentionally vague. I just think a person must have enough conversations with Jesus to begin to understand the way he thinks. And it just so happened that the disciples had the luxury of picking his brain 24/7.

But I will concede that we, each one of us, must work with parables on a consistent basis to begin to understand their deeper meanings. While at Wake Forest, the dean of our divinity school, Gail O'Day, offered a deeper reflection on the mustard seed – she even suggested this was a subversive parable.

“Have you ever seen a mustard plant?” she asked us. “Or have you ever had to maintain one? Well, they're not a lot of fun. Because they engrain themselves in everything. If left unchecked, they can get into everything else in the garden. They spread. And they tangle. And they take up residence with your other plants.”

And when I heard her say this, I wasn't half-surprised. Because while I haven't had a mustard plant, I've consumed lots of mustard. I can't think of one sandwich I've ever had with mustard that didn't get all over me, my clothes, and everything I touched!!! All it takes is the smallest dollop. It only stands to reason that the plant would behave the same way!!!

Dean O'Day, like other scholars, also notes the royal significance of the image of birds nesting. Prophets foretold that God would plant a mighty cedar on Israel's highest hill, and the birds, that is the nations of the world, would find respite in its branches.

And I wonder how such a tale must have been received in the time of Jesus. Here they were, enduring Roman occupation, hoping for a Messiah in the form of David, to become a mighty cedar, who would rule above them in majesty and glory. And Jesus is talking about a kingdom that's gonna grow like a mustard plant? And that means God's not gonna be something that dwells over people, but rather something that dwells in their midst. And not only in their midst, but really, all up in

their business. Around them. Beside them. Amongst them. In the thick of it. Here and now.

At the end of her lecture, Dean O'Day gave all of her students a packet of mustard seeds. She told us the seeds represented our ideas, and our hopes, and that when planted, she believed they would help bring about God's kin-dom, by growing and becoming entwined in the world with all the persistence and peskiness of a mustard plant.

And she was right. Her students, not to mention the thousands of parishioners they now serve, are provoked into active love by engaging the scriptures, and applying biblical insight to their surroundings. Some pursue environmental justice, others justice for the immigrant, or the marginalized, or the oppressed. They engage neighbors who are homeless, or lost, or depressed, or facing deportation, or struggling to find a job, or working through grief, or wrestling with illness, or pondering the deepest theological questions. And somehow, the cause, whether micro or macro, tells them that this person, or this thing, or this idea is too vital to be ignored. God's kin-dom – that is the tangible, pronounced, big ball of divine love – will become glimpsed with shelter for the night, or bread broken and shared, or empathy expressed, or kindnesses shown, or the simple acknowledgement of neighbor.

Today, Jesus tells us that despite our prep work, God will do the heavy lifting. And that though seems tiny now, it's growing. For when we plant our mustard seeds, we can expect blades of green, creeping grass. In June, when we thought it'd never happen! And we can expect a kin-dom that will grow. Not over us. But in our midst. And invite us to join in, too!

A Few Final Thoughts

Because biblical interpretation has been a hot topic this week, and because we've explored two parables this morning, I want to close with a few thoughts.

The Bible is a collection of writings, edited and redacted to its final form over the course of hundreds of years. It's also a collection of writings written by people who lived in specific places and times, and who sought to make sense of God in their context. And it's a collection of writings that were written in a patriarchal world, with redactions to support and sustain patriarchal systems.

That means that while we read many, many good things in these texts, we also read some dangerous passages that need to be handled with thoughtful consideration.

For me, the scriptures have introduced a God who has not only created the world, but also loves and values the whole of creation. And they speak overwhelmingly of the human responsibility to love both God and neighbor. And they define our neighbor in the broadest possible way – it's not just whom we love, or whom we look like, or whom we think should be our neighbor. Our neighbors are EVERY created being, all made specifically in the image of God. And we're told to love.

If one so chooses, they can certainly find a dozen or so disclaimers in the more than 2,000 pages of the Bible to take issue with my assertion. And I would point them to five times as many to defend my assertion against theirs.

But here's the thing. I, we, don't worship an imperfect text. I, we, read inspired texts that call us to worship a living, breathing, loving God. And

as much as we may wish some days that God, and that God's kingdom sat atop of us like a cedar tree, neither one does. And as much as we may wish that God's kingdom was tidy and neat and full of decimal point answers, it isn't.

God sits beside us, in our midst, entwined in us like a mustard plant. And God's kingdom is messy, and overgrown, and scattered, and pretty wonderful, too. And the Spirit that filled Jesus, and fills you and me too, provokes us, pesters us, challenges us to remove all the disclaimers we place on the word neighbor. And Jesus tells us that when we stand up for our neighbors in a world that tries to shut them out, God's kingdom is growing. We may not see it. And may not be able to explain how it manifests itself. And it may not look like it's all that significant right now. But it matters. And it's coming. You'll see!!!

The parables, and all the other stories, are not weapons of authority to be thrown about like stinging darts. And they are not the hammer of oppression meant to flatten all those who would dare challenge the injustices of man. And they are not secret codes meant to wall off non-believers.

The scriptures, as Jessica so eloquently points out each Sunday, are an invitation to all who would seek them, whether willingly, reluctantly, or any other state. And they are tools to help discover, dream, and build the kind of world, where the orphan, and the widow, and the stranger know the deepest and fullest love and grace of God. And where all people work beyond measure to ensure that such love and grace are extended to their neighbors as well. I believe you call that kingdom or kin-dom living.

Tangled
Bob Stillerman
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But I'm actually gonna try something for the next little while. I think the kingdom of God is really the kindness of God. What if God's kindness got tangled up in us like a mustard plant? What if God's kindness wasn't reduced to the bloodlines of kinship or the formality of kingdoms? What if God's kindness was as easy a smile?

Good friends, let's revel in the joyful mystery of germinating seeds. And let's gobble up all the mustard we can. And let's listen, really listen, to hear the power of transformative stories. And let's invite our neighbors, all of them, to join us in experiencing the kindness of God. And let's do it today.

Amen.