

“Kingdom Parables”

Proper 6B, June 14, 2009

Mark 4:26-34

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church

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He also said, “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.”

He also said, “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.”

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Prayer.

We have two different, but similar, parables from Jesus this morning.

One is about one who scatters seed,

Goes to bed,

And rises to find the seed grew.

The second is about a tiny mustard seed,

When sown

It grows to become the greatest shrub.

Jesus often taught in parables,

As opposed to speaking plainly and forthrightly.

Behind closed doors, and in the presence of his disciples,

Jesus was obviously more direct.

But when in public,

Jesus often chose parables as

A literary style of choice.

Many have hypothesized why.

1. Some suggest that Jesus taught in parables as a means of self-preservation;

If the religious authorities witnessed Jesus challenging their corruption of God’s perfect institution, they may have prematurely had him put to death.

So Jesus could be just obscure enough to keep him out of trouble, yet clear enough to get his point across.

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2. By their very nature, parables are simple, memorable, using common, humble imagery, and are easy to retell; which has led others to suggest that Jesus wanted his message to be retained and spread.

Think: Grow deep; grow wide.

Think: Discipleship and evangelism.

3. Still others have hypothesized that Jesus used parables as a means of provoking thought and coaxing the listener into participating more actively in the story.

Jesus probably had these three reasons, and more for speaking in parables.

I believe it is best to keep the interpretation simple.

Don't over analyze them.

Speak them aloud,

Reflect on them,

Maul them over in your mind.

Let the Spirit speak.

And draw your own conclusion.

The two parables Jesus teaches this morning are about the kingdom of God.

Kingdom is a word not often used today,

But it certainly had meaning in ancient times, during the middle ages, and through the renaissance.

Kingdoms had kings,

Rulers who were men,

Holding massive riches,

Inheriting both wealth and authority.

Some became king by birth, others by violent means, still others by marriage.

The king created the rules, enforced the rules, and passed judgment upon those accused of breaking the rule.

Every member of the kingdom worked for the benefit of the king in exchange for safety and protection.

Benevolent kings ran good kingdoms.

But more often than not, power, riches, and authority caused many to turn bad.

City sized kingdoms grew into regional kingdoms, like Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome.

Seeking ever more size, wealth, power, status, legacy

King turned upon King.

Kingdom turned upon kingdom,

Rising and falling in cyclical fashion.

Prosperity followed by weakening, fall, regeneration, and prosperity all over again.

People tire of the cycle,

But each new charismatic despot takes advantage of people's short memory and the promise of personal gain or glory.

Original sin finds a way to endlessly mutate and replicate.

So holocaust repeats itself. War and violence continues with unending ferocity.

Creative depravity knows no end.

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Such was the kingdom of Rome in the time of Jesus.

The search for God

May be just as motivated by a desire to get out of this place and these repetitive circumstances as much as it might be for higher or nobler reasons.

Let's dump our king and government

And follow God instead?

Applying the human metaphor,

We make God king,

Give God all authority to create law, enforce the law, and pass judgment upon those who transgress the law.

We return gifts to God.

We learn God's ways.

We follow God's will.

It isn't a perfect metaphor,

Applying the imperfect to the Divine,

But it was the best Jesus could do,

Because that is what the people knew.

So he teaches about God's kingdom.

To the dull or the uninspired, kingdom talk may have been received as a threat to those in power,

Namely Rome, and the Jewish authorities.

But to those who were tired of this earthly cycle and were searching for something more, thinking about the kingdom of God was like a key that unlocked the imagination of how life can be living completely under the dominion of a benevolent and loving king.

So, here we have two parables about the kingdom of God.¹

In the first, we search for the cast of characters.

If God is the sower

Like we often think of God as being a sower

We are puzzled by the fact that the sower doesn't know how the seed grows.

That doesn't work.

So, try this: we are the gardener and God is responsible for the growth.

Yet, the harvest belongs to the sower.

But this doesn't work because we know the harvest belongs to the risen Christ, not to us.

Hum.

Time to step back and take a look at the big picture.

The early Christian community expected Christ to return at any moment.

¹ Explanations for these two parables and conclusion can be attributed to the exceptional work of Sharon H. Ringe, Professor of New Testament, Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, DC; as found at: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=6/14/2009&tab=4

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All would be judged.
 The kingdom would come on earth as it is in heaven.
 This was the expectation of Mark's community of faithful.
 Consider the possibility that it is not Jesus' intent to explain the kingdom of God,
 Rather, this is a confrontation with the audience that demands a response.
 The reign of God is not "like"
 The farmer
 The seed
 The process of growth
 Or, the harvest.
 Rather,
 The kingdom of God is "sorta like"
 each of them
 and all of them taken together.
 In God's kingdom
 The seeds are sown
 Germinate
 And grow.
 God's kingdom grows.
 In God's kingdom,
 Judgment is unavoidable.
 The harvest comes to every member of God's kingdom
 Like it
 Or not.
 That is a parable that demands a response!

The second parable
 Was also one that was simple and
 Easy for an agrarian audience to grasp.
 One would think.
 The problem is
 In the same breath
 Jesus compares the kingdom of God with a weed!
 They just seem like un-natural dance partners.
 The farmers in the crowd would scratch their heads
 Because not one of them would intentionally plant mustard
 Any more than one of us would plant dandelions in our yard.
 They had spent their days toiling to rid themselves of mustard.
 They wouldn't plant it.
 They would have also noticed
 Mustard seeds aren't the smallest
 And mustard bushes aren't the biggest.
 Exaggeration follows absurdity.
 What gives, Jesus?

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Again, let's take a look at the big picture.
 Jesus creates contrast between the small seed and the large plant.
 This works well as an image fore the reign of God.
 This is good news to people aware of Jesus' humble beginnings.
 This is good news to people struggling to start a new community of faith.
 The predatory ability of an aggressive weed like mustard
 Could crowd out the planned crops of the Romans.
 Even birds taking shelter in their branches
 Would peck away at the carefully planted crops.
 Understanding would have produced a cacophony of chuckles in the crowd.
 The idea that God empire would subvert the enterprises of Rome,
 Now that's Good News!
 Even deeper still,
 The faithful in the crowd would have been aware of the similar imagery from
 Ezekiel (17:22-24);
 A book that paints a picture of end-times.
 God plants a tiny cedar twig on a high mountain.
 The twig becomes a large and fruitful tree
 Under whose branches every kind of bird finds shelter.
 The birds are symbolized as the nations of the world
 That flock to Israel's God on the glorious day of the Lord.
 This picture in both Ezekiel and Mark
 Envisions a day when God's sovereignty and life giving power
 Will embrace the whole world.
 Now that's Good News.

So, what's the take home?
 The answer isn't easy,
 But try this.
 We live in an ordered, planned, linear, logical world
 Filled with cyclical violence and sin.
 God ushers in a world of contrast,
 One filled with mysteries
 And surprises,
 Into which, we are invited.
 We test the "sorta like" stories.
 We dip our toe into God's kingdom
 And what we find
 Is delight,
 Is refreshing change,
 A new wind that's blowing;
 Good News
 That business as usual can't last forever.
 Amen.

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