

June 15, 2003  
Season after Pentecost  
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## The Growth of the Kingdom

Mark 4:26-32      *'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.'*

### What is a parable?

Our gospel reading from Mark this morning presents us with two familiar parables. Jesus told them to awaken in us an awareness of the kingdom of God.

Jesus' teaching style, especially when it comes to parables, was very oriental in nature. Parables are like the *koan* in Buddhist teachings. A familiar *koan* is: What is the sound of one hand clapping? A *koan* is given to a disciple as a point of meditation. It is designed to shake up conventional ways of thinking and looking at things. The point is not to "figure out" the answer to the *koan*, but to reflect deeply upon it so that it creates a whole new way of seeing, a deeper understanding of reality.

Jesus' parables can awaken in us a clearer, deeper perception of God's presence and activity in the world. They are to awaken in us faith, the very life of God's kingdom.

### The parable of the growing seed

The first parable begins: "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground," says Jesus. Is the "someone" God, or the disciples, or us today? Maybe God or someone else sowed the seed sown in us years ago, when we were young, or only yesterday when our spirits were touched in a small way that continues to grow in us. The seed may be a tiny glimpse into what might be, what God might be calling us to do.

Last weekend Kaye and I were at Craig Springs, the Virginia Disciples of Christ conference grounds. In the mid 1960s, I spent a week each summer there at youth conference. These were weeks of much seed planting in us as young people. One clear memory is what we called "morning watch." At seven in the morning, we would be roused from bed by the bell. We were to take our Bibles and notebooks and go out to find a quiet place to sit for fifteen minutes. We were to read our Bibles, write in our notebooks, and pray. This was a struggle for us youngsters. Looking back on it, this was perhaps the most memorable and significant time of the day for us. We were learning solitude and silence, the way of communion with God, with the creation, with ourselves. This was the seed of the life of prayer that has grown in me over the years, planted in a small way.

The startling thing about this parable is that the emphasis is on the growth of the seed into harvest without the work of the farmer. The farmer goes to bed and gets up, day after day, and the seed grows by itself. The farmer hasn't a clue how or why it grows. The earth brings forth the harvest out of its own fecundity, its fruitfulness and potency. That's what the kingdom of God is like, says Jesus. That's how God is present and active in the world to bring new life. This is hard for us to hear, prone to activism as we are. But it is the Good News, that God's ultimate and deep purposes continue to unfold, beyond our own efforts or knowledge.

How can Jesus say such a thing? He calls us to discipleship, to give ourselves completely in compassionate and just action. But now he seems to be saying the opposite. The kingdom of God is not something we accomplish. The reign of God grows without our anxious hovering and manipulation, without our fretful and exhausting efforts. God's kingdom grows as sure as the

earth brings forth a harvest, and the farmer contributes nothing but to let the growth happen, to be present to this great mystery, and to be ready when the harvest comes.

Paul had this same insight when he wrote to the Corinthian church, a community embroiled in tensions and conflicts, ego-trips and power plays. They were trying to build the kingdom of God out of their own hungry egos and desires for control. Little power groups knew just how they wanted the garden to grow and were fighting tooth and toenail to make it happen. And they tried to drag Paul into it, making him either a hero or a villain to their own causes. To all of this he said, “Phooey!” Well, he didn’t actually say, “Phooey!” What he said was, “What is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.” (1 Cor. 3:5-7)

The parable of the seed growing into a harvest is a call to faith. The work of God’s redeeming love in the world is not in our control, is beyond our comprehension, and ultimately is not the result of our efforts. We can put this parable in with other teachings of Jesus that call us away from anxiousness and feverish activism. “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear....Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?”(Matt. 6:25-33) Jesus’ preaching, which called people to repentance in the dawn of God’s kingdom, was not a call to build the kingdom of God but to enter into it, to receive it, to let their lives become part of what God is already doing.

#### The parable of the mustard seed

In the parable of the mustard seed a tiny seed that grows into a great shrub. Mustard plants grow to be about eight or ten feet tall. Certainly not the greatest of trees, and the mustard seed, is not, in fact, the smallest of seeds. But the point is not scientific accuracy, but contrast. The kingdom of God is like a tiny seed that grows into a large bush that shelters the birds. Small beginnings and great manifestations.

D.E. Nineham, in his commentary on the Gospel of Mark, writes these words about this parable: “The unspectacular and outwardly insignificant ministry of Jesus may not look the sort of thing that can usher in the kingdom of God, but then, the parable says, the example of the mustard seed should prevent us from judging the significance of results by the size of the beginnings.” (Saint Mark, p. 144) There are little nudges of God’s kingdom all around us, little beginnings waiting for us to take them up. But we are too often enamored of the big results we want, snowed by the “success stories” we hear about. We want to have a real prayer life, but resist taking the first step, devoting even a few minutes to silence and prayer each day. We want to do something great for humanity, to meet the needs of people, but overlook the little opportunities and openings that at our fingertips every day. We want so badly to do great things, but do not do the little things that grow into great things. We have this tendency to founder in discouragement, always measuring ourselves and our lives against what we perceive to be “great things” and “great people.”

The way God works, says Jesus, is from what seems to us tiny and insignificant to the great and fruitful. The parable can awaken our attentiveness to the small things.

#### What we learn from the parables

What might we glean from these parables to nourish and deepen our faith and mission?

First, remember that Jesus tells these parables to his disciples, those he has called to lay down their lives for the Good News. Now Jesus gives them a word to balance their lives. Radical discipleship must not become activism or fanaticism. Responding to the call to live according to God’s kingdom, with all the sacrifice and self-giving that entails, does mean

exhausting our lives and spirits because we think we are responsible for the kingdom. Serious, disciplined lives of faith must have at their core a deep trust in God, that it is God who brings about the transformation of life, not us. We might say that the “hot” life of faithfulness to Christ’s call—the outward journey—must have a “cool” center, free from anxiety, worry, and obsession.

Second, God is at work in our inward lives. The life of the kingdom is planted and growing in us. We must not turn the inward journey into anxious and obsessive self-work. We need to remember that God is at work in the depths of our being as we simply open ourselves up to God in faith. The spiritual disciplines we take on should not become harsh rules with which we beat up on ourselves. Rather they are the guides that keep us within the cultivating reach of God. Perhaps our first prayer of the day needs to be: “Thank you, God, for the work you are doing in me. I may not even see it right now, but I know that the seed of your love for me is growing into greater love, compassion, and freedom. I know that my life is hidden in Christ, like the seed planted in the earth, and that you are bringing about the growth.”

Third, this inward trust in God’s work in the world needs to be at the center of our outward service. We talk about the importance of “ultimate responsibility” in the missions to which we are called. That means that we assume responsibility for all aspects of what God has called us to do. We do not expect those not called to our particular mission to bail us out or to pick up the slack that we ourselves must shoulder. We willingly risk the success and the failure. However, the other side of ultimate responsibility, whether in our personal spiritual lives or in our outward missions, is ultimate trust that God will supply us with what is needed. This becomes very important when things, in fact, do fall apart or when the mission founders and fails. The ministries we take on are in response to what we sense God is doing in the world. When our efforts flag and fail, when the dreams are not fulfilled or our fondest hopes dashed, then we need to come back to the center, to the awareness that God’s kingdom, the realm of God’s redeeming love, still is at work. The seed growing secretly, without our efforts or even our awareness, reminds us that God’s presence and working in the world is much deeper and broader than our efforts and our vision.

Finally, we need to remember the smallness of the mustard seed and to be faithful to the small beginnings God offers us all the time. We get impatient for big results. But that’s not how it happens. The emphasis in the parable is not even on the greatness of the mustard tree at its full growth. The emphasis is on the beginnings, the smallness. The Wood Ministry began years ago on the day that Bev Cosby responded to one phone call from one person who needed one bundle of wood in a bitter cold winter. From that one load of firewood grew a ministry to many people in the city who were suffering. Helen Ditsebe Mahone is an HIV-positive woman in Botswana whom Kaye and I met three years ago. In the midst of the horrific and overwhelming AIDS pandemic, she saw the need for others who were HIV-positive or living with AIDS to have a place to come during the day for rest, food, conversation, support. So she started one such place, the AIDS Coping Center, in Gaborone, the capital city. One need. One small response. One mustard seed on its way to becoming a tree providing shelter and rest.

What seeds are in you, growing already toward a harvest of new life? What seeds are scattered in your mind or at your feet, the small things that you are tempted to overlook and count as unimpressive or unimportant? Small beginnings. That’s the secret. And whether the seed grows into the great tree we thought it might or into a tree we didn’t expect or even stays a small plant, it is all part of the great, secretly growing realm of God.

I said that Jesus’ parables are very “Eastern” in style, but also content. The Tao te Ching was written by Lao-tzu some time in the sixth century before Christ. For several years I have read this little book in my daily time of prayer and found it an enriching complement to the Bible. This passage contains some familiar words:

*The giant pine tree grows from a tiny sprout.  
The journey of a thousand miles starts from beneath your feet.  
Rushing into action, you fail. Trying to grasp things, you lose them.  
Forcing a project to completion, you ruin what is almost ripe.*

Finally these words from Thomas Merton, which I have kept near my desk for many years:

*Do not depend on the hope of results. When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on, essentially an apostolic work, you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no results at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect...The big results are not in your hands or mine, but they suddenly happen, and we can share in them; but there is no point in building our lives on this personal satisfaction, which may be denied us and which after all is not that important. If you can get free from the domination of causes and just serve Christ's truth, you will be able to do more and will be less crushed by the inevitable disappointments. The real hope, then, is not in something we think we can do, but in God who is making something good out of it in some way we cannot see. If we can do God's will, we will be helping in the process. (from Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, I think)*

I once heard this aphorism: Work as though everything depends on you; pray as though everything depends on God. I don't think this is true. I think it is this way: Pray as though everything depends on you, drawing all the strength, peace, and portion of God's spirit that you need to live faithfully. And work as though everything depends on God, with a free heart and mind, confident that it is God's work in which you have been invited to share. In this way, whatever we do, we will communicate peace and the Good News of God's dawning and growing kingdom.