

The Growth of the Kingdom

Mark 4:26-32 *He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?"*

Two of the most profound of Jesus' parables of the kingdom of God are the smallest—the parable of the seed growing into the harvest and the parable of the tiny mustard seed growing into a large shrub.

The kingdom of God refers to the reality of God's reign in our lives and the life of the world. It is life the way God made it and wants it to be. Jesus' life and teachings centered around the dawning of God's reign and he called people to change their lives in order to receive and be part of that new day.

A parable is a rather Eastern way of teaching. It is a simple story or teaching that is meant to open up our minds and our inner vision to see things in a new way. Parables aren't like puzzles to be figured out. There is no one fixed meaning to them. They are meant for us to contemplate so that they inspire in us a new and deeper vision of reality.

First Jesus tells the parable of the seed that is scattered by "someone" on the ground. The sower, or farmer, or gardener then goes to bed, gets up, and goes to bed. The seed sprouts and grows, and how it all happens is a mystery to the sower. The earth produces "of itself," says Jesus. This fits with the first story of creation in Genesis 1. The earth is created by God with a fecundity—I love that word—that brings forth life in trees and plants and all growing things.

The emphasis is on the growing of the seed in the earth without the sower doing a thing! It grows into a great harvest and the sower goes into the field to harvest the grain. Seed planting and harvesting—that's all the sower has to do. The growth happens on its own. The sower doesn't cause it. The sower doesn't do a thing but watch and wait for the harvest.

What could Jesus mean by this? Since it is a parable of the kingdom of God, we can say that all we have to do, if we are to find ourselves in the story, is to plant seeds and watch for the harvest. The growth is up to God and it is a complete mystery to us. But the growth is also sure and certain. It doesn't depend on us. All we do is get out of the way and let it happen.

Now this is hard for us to grasp as activist sorts of Christians! We talk about "ultimate responsibility" and sometimes "building the kingdom of God." The parable says the opposite. The growth of God's kingdom involves our planting some seeds. It involves our being attentive and watchful. It involves cultivating in ourselves a spiritual wonder at the

mystery of it. And it involves our being ready to reap the harvest. But the growth of God's kingdom is God's doing, not ours.

We experience this when we follow God's call to a particular mission. God plants in us a seed, a vision of what we believe God wants us to do. We nurture that vision in our hearts through prayer and inner listening. We come together with others to form a mission group around the vision and mission. We discern what beginning steps we are to take, the seeds we need to plant. There is always much work to do, no doubt. And we do take complete responsibility for what God has called us to do. But we commit ourselves to a group inward journey in our mission groups is so that together we can be attentive to the growth. Together we cultivate the spiritual vision to see what God is doing all along the way and to follow that growth in the directions it goes.

This accounts for the strange thing we discover and try to explain to others, that in a certain sense, we really don't know what we are doing! On Monday I was sitting in the chapel of the Festival Center waiting for the service of prayer to begin. Someone was with me, a friend who has dropped by the center from time to time over the past two years. He is a young man who has been a challenge for us in some ways. We don't know exactly what is going on in his life. He comes in sometimes quite agitated and rather disruptive. Yet on other days he seems calmer when he wanders in off the street. This day, he initiated our conversation. He was saying how he had been coming to the Center almost from the beginning, which is true, and that the reason he comes by is to find some peace and to find God. Then he said, "You are the first white man I've met who isn't afraid to be down here where I live." Now, you must understand that all of this sharing on his part was something that has only begun to happen recently. I said a bit to him about why we wanted to be there in the first place, just to be there, to get to know people, to overcome separateness in ourselves. Then I said half-jokingly that we've been three years in that place and we really don't know what we were doing. He gave a slight laugh as though he understood what I meant. And I realized that what I said was quite true. The seed, the kingdom grows, and we don't know how. It is a mystery to us.

In that moment, however, I realized that a harvest was right in front of me, in this young man who seems so lost and angry and perhaps fearful, who now looks at me directly when we speak and he even asks me how I am doing! It's planting seeds, that's all. Then watching the growth and being aware when the harvest is right in front of your eyes. It's been the same with every other mission undertaken by this church. A glimpse of God's kingdom in some specific call to some specific work. Then taking the little steps to begin and paying attention to the growth that comes as we make room for it, understanding that we have nothing at all to

do with it. And then all along the way celebrating the harvests, great and small.

Do you see what I'm getting at? It's subtle, I know. But it's at the heart of this parable. It's a matter of doing what we can do while at the same time getting out of the way so God can bring the growth. We don't force it. We don't cause it. We just open up our hearts and minds and lives, creating a space where the seed can grow into a harvest.

I said that parables are essentially an Eastern type of teaching. Let me share some words from the *Tao te Ching*, a Chinese book of wisdom at least as old as the Hebrew scriptures in our Bible. It has to do, I think, with what Jesus was driving at. Here is what the *Tao* says:

Do you want to improve the world? I don't think it can be done.

The world is sacred. It can't be improved.

If you tamper with it, you'll ruin it.

If you treat it like an object, you'll lose it. (Tao te Ching 29)

It is about letting the world be the world God made. It is about learning the kind of spiritual insight that helps us perceive how things really are and letting them be, taking our hands off. It has to do with living our lives with this spiritual sensitivity to God's present and growing kingdom.

Then Jesus tells the parable of the mustard seed. This one is so familiar that we might miss its power and potency. The tiniest of seeds grows into a full shrub that shelters the birds of the air. Small beginnings and large endings. The little things that have within them the potential for growth and life beyond our expectations. Again, the fecundity of God's kingdom, God's reign.

One of the many things that I cherish about our community is our understanding that it is the little things that are most important. The one specific and focused mission. The one person whose need we try to respond to. The one gift that a person has that is so full of life and blessing. The attention to detail and the care of what we have instead of getting caught up in the cultural sickness of wanting more and having more. The wisdom that comes from knowing it is only our faithfulness to the small thing that enables the bigger thing to happen.

The problem is that we are impatient, even out of good motivations. We are tempted to stop believing in the power of the small things. We want to see big changes and we want it right now! But the deal with that is we end up frustrated, even angry, and not getting anything done. The most impressive and life-giving work I've seen comes from people who are attentive to the small things, who assume responsibility over what they feel called to do and stick with it over the long haul. It takes patience, humility, and a deep devotion. But it also brings us the pure and deep joy that comes from having the time of our lives doing what we feel called to do. We learn how to stop looking for results and relish the process of giving to the world what God has given us uniquely to give.

It is a matter of deep and growing commitment to community, to mission, to our own spiritual growth. That's the way the kingdom of God grows from small things into larger things.

Tuesday morning Mark Russell, Jayna Powell and I were sitting in the Lodge talking. Jayna was down from Baltimore scouting out projects for the work group she is bringing from her church in July. I don't remember how it came up, but the subject turned to faithfulness and sticking with things over the long haul. Mark said it was a matter of just "showing up." Then he added, "Keep showing up." I liked this very much. We have to keep showing up for life. That's what faith is. We show up because we believe that something else is happening in the depths of things and our "showing up," being faithful and attentive is important so that we can perceive it and be part of it. That "something else" is what scripture calls the kingdom of God. It is God's presence, movement, and power in life. The seed, the kingdom grows mysteriously out of its own potency. But it is important that the farmer goes about his normal life, keeps showing up for life, watching and waiting for the harvest. The point is to live lives that have this quality of "getting out of the way" so God's kingdom can grow, so life can be as it is supposed to be.

Jesus never said that we build the kingdom of God or have any direct part in bringing it about. Our work is to "repent," to change our minds, our lives, the directions we are going so that we can get with what God is already doing. That's what the inward journey is about, making room in our awareness and our inner life for a sensitivity to God's presence and movements in our lives and the life of the world. It is a kind of spiritual balance, a spiritual art, if you will. Doing what we are called to do with responsibility, care, and faithfulness—keep showing up. At the same time, knowing that the growth of God's kingdom is God's doing, not ours, that it is sure and will bring harvests for which we need to prepare and be ready to recognize and celebrate.