

Mark 4:26-34

26 He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, 27 and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. 28 The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. 29 But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

30 He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? 31 It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 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." 33 With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; 34 he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

We have, today two parables: one about sowing (scattering) seed; and the second one about the mustard seed (a small seed growing a big shady plant).

Parables are not pearls of wisdom Jesus is dispensing like a self-help coach.

A parable is not simply an analogy for us to figure out, where A=God and B=Jesus and C=us. Some parables do function analogically, but they are not generally an encoded message for us to decipher. They are also not morality tales or fables. There is rarely a moral at the end for us to apply.

They are not literal ... nor are they lineal.

Parables are narrative contrasts – Eugene Peterson calls them, “narrative time bombs” – that are meant to undermine our assumptions of the various “givens” and even “realities” that we accept unquestioningly. A parable offers us a vision of something different.

“Parable” comes from two Greek words, *para*, “beside,” and *ballein*, “to throw.” A parable is throwing one thing (**a vision of God’s kingdom**) beside another (**the world as it is**) to see what happens.

The comparisons are unpredictable – sometimes stark, sometimes subtle, sometimes obvious, sometimes something to mull over. But because they call into



question accepted “truths,” they are almost always a bit subversive, challenging and even goading us to consider other possibilities in light of God’s promises.

The two kingdom parables in today’s gospel passage **traffic in mystery rather than knowledge**, and in unpredictable rather than deliberate results. In the first, the farmer scatters the seed and doesn’t know how it grows, nor helps with the growth, but comes out as soon as the harvest is ready. In the second, the seed grows into a plant that, apart from its medicinal and culinary value, becomes big enough for birds to nest in its shade.

We most frequently translate *basileia* as “the kingdom of God.” That phrase is so entrenched in our biblical vocabulary. The challenge with that is this:

To translate *basileia tou Theou* as the “kingdom” seems **so static**, as if describing some fixed place, because *basileia* is a far more dynamic term, describing the arenas of God’s activity and influence.

It would be better to translate it “the reign” or “rule” of God to highlight the **more active dimension** of the word.

These parables describe something more qualitative than locational – in an effort that we might see the world as God does,

When we act toward each other as God would have us, we are living in God’s rule. What that means is that we can experience and enact the kingdom here and *now* as well as recognize that even our best efforts fall short of God’s vision and so recognize that God’s activity and reign is *not yet* fully present among us.

We cast seeds and the seeds grow without our effort. That is how God will bring about God’s reign. It is not up to us. We can’t make it happen. Nor can we prevent it. God is ultimately responsible for bringing God’s rule and reign to bear. This is sheer promise. But it is also a little discomfoting, especially when we realize that God’s rule and reign and concern and activity is on behalf of **everyone**, even those who look or believe or think differently than we do.

We can’t bring God’s reign of redemption and love and grace, but neither can we control it, moderate it, or domesticate it. And we definitely can’t stop it. In this sense, it is more like the mustard plant that, like an out of control weed, grows and spreads and can hardly be contained, even if you’re not sure you want it.



It's a slightly unsettling promise...at least if you think about it. Kind of like the petition we so regularly pray, "*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.*" Do we really want God's rule and will to be enacted among us? Probably when we or a loved one is sick, hurting, or in need. But so often we're content with things as they are that we mouth those words with *no actual desire* that they come true.

- In this light, this parable shakes us up a little, awakening us to the promise that God is on the move – in our life, in our community, in the world – and that God will in time complete the work God has started. In the meantime, we're invited to enact God's reign wherever we are, acting in the confidence that God's promises are true.
- This means that when things are going well, we can take delight in being more aligned with God's will and ways. It also means that when life is hard, when we meet resistance, or when we fail or fall far short of our hopes, that we can take refuge in the promise that God is still at work and has not given up on us or the world.

We cannot, in short, measure the strength or validity of God's promises based on our efforts, but rather allow the promises of the God who created light out of darkness and raised Jesus from the dead to give us a quiet and resilient confidence to take joy when we see God's reign lived out and to be encouraged and empowered to keep faith when we don't.

There is an adage for preachers: – “work like it's all up to you, and pray like it's all up to God” –

- That adage is true for every Christian; because it describes an aspect of every element of our life of faith.
- We should throw ourselves into the opportunities and challenges ahead of us with equal measures of delight and resolve.
- We keep in mind that we know that God is with us and for us; and by faith we appreciate that no work done in love is ever lost.
- God, in time, will draw all things together for good.

Plants will grow; plants will die. For everything there is a season, and for everything God has purpose. Go with the mystery; go with the faith. **AMEN.**

