

Lectionary 11

June 17, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Mark. (Mark 4: 26-34)

[Jesus 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.

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

“With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it?”

How would you describe the kingdom of God, the reign of God, the dreams of God? How would you describe what God wants for the world, and how the world will some day be on that great day when Christ returns? What do you hope for? Is it peace? No sickness or death? All creation loved and cared for? All people having enough to eat and a place to live? People getting along? And what does this even look like? How does this work, because there are, well, people involved.

Debie Thomas was dealing with a sick child. And as she reflected on God’s reign, she wrote this:

“In my perfect version of God’s kingdom, I do A and God does B. Predictably and always. As in, I pray for my son’s healing, and God heals him immediately.

“In my perfect version, I understand what the heck is going on, at least 95% of the time. In other words, when life gets hard, God at least provides decent answers to the ‘why?’ questions, instead of leaving me to wallow in the unknown.

“In my perfect version, God makes grand gestures, does spectacular things. The kingdom isn’t commonplace and ordinary; it is straightforwardly miraculous. And in my perfect version, there are clear boundaries of what is good and what is bad. Who is in and who is out.”¹

Personally, I would add that I would never worry again, but that might be pushing it a little far.

We each know what we want the world to look like. We know what we want from God. But is that what God wants?

Today, Jesus gives us two hints into the mystery of God’s reign. Two parables. Two short, simple parables, about seeds growing from something small into something big. Which is logical and good and natural. But there’s some other stuff in these parables that is just plain odd. You hear it and you think, “Did he just say that?” They make us wonder — which, I guess, is the point of a parable.

“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 (the Greek says) “automatically,” – the earth produces automatically, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.

The grain is little, and it grows big. This is a good thing. But let me read this again. And I want you to listen for all the things that the human does in this process. What does the human do?

“The kingdom of God is as if someone [a human] 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 with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

But what does the human do? The human scatters seed. Scatters seed. They don’t prepare the soil. They don’t sow or plant the seed. They throw it around. What kind of farmer is this? A bad farmer! The farmer scatters seed and walks away. No watering, no fertilizing, no weeding, no worrying. Sleeps and wakes, sleeps and wakes. La-la-la. Pays zero attention to what is going on.

¹ Debie Thomas, “And Then The Kingdom,” Journey with Jesus, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=1809>. Accessed June 16, 2018.

Well, maybe there is a crisis in his family. Maybe she is working three other jobs. Maybe he has no idea what he's doing. The seed get thrown around and suddenly . . . *Surprise!* There is a harvest. It happened – even if the farmer was less than optimal.

Now, don't be thinking – “Yeah. But that really doesn't happen. There could have been drought or pests or disease, and he could have lost his whole harvest. He could have lost everything. He's not going to get very far farming like that.” Don't go there. This is a story. This is a folk tale, to describe what the reign of God looks like. So it could be that God is going to take our less than optimal efforts – our clueless, confused attempts at following God, – and, *Surprise!* Something amazing happens, far more than we ever expected. It sort of makes sense, if you think about it.

Jesus walked around Galilee with a bunch of disciples who had no idea what they were doing. He hung out with all the wrong people. He was always in trouble for the way he was doing things. And then he got himself executed. It's not looking like much is going to grow out of that. But, *Surprise!* God gives us Easter.

Then the apostles blundered their way all over the Mediterranean. Paul starts churches that are always in trouble, with heresy, and infighting, and disagreements, and bad decisions. And, *Surprise!* God gives an ever-expanding church.

And then there's us, who are never good enough, or religious enough, or smart enough, and who disagree about how things should be done and how people should behave. And the truth is, God is still working in us. *Surprise!* The kingdom is growing here, among us, in pure grace.

It's kind of like being a father. You know, it's Father's Day, so I'm gong to use you guys as an example. Fathers love control. Children teach them that they don't have it. Right? Right? You can set boundaries. You can teach. You can throw out all you know like seed. You can't make them grow. You can't make them learn or become what you want.

In the same way, we do what we can, and God's reign comes in God's time, God's way, by God's grace, and will always surprise us. The kingdom of God is a glorious mystery.

“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.”

Again, there is that growing from something little to something big. But there's also weirdness. *“It is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all . . .”* what? Shrubs! This little seed grows into . . . a bush. Jesus is messing with us here.

Compare that to Ezekiel 17 from the First Reading:

*“Thus says the Lord GOD:
I myself will take a [little] sprig
from the lofty top of a cedar;*

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*I will plant it
on a high and lofty mountain
in order that it may produce boughs
and bear fruit,
and become a noble cedar.
Under it every kind of bird
will live;
in the shade of its branches
will nest
winged creatures of every kind.”*

Ezekiel is describing the mighty cedars of Lebanon. They are known worldwide, famous for their size, and their straightness, and their strength – like the redwoods in California, - power, and glory, and shade. But Jesus comes along and says almost the same thing about a mighty . . . bush. Hey, this thing might get to four feet! And mustard is scruffy looking. It's wild. Nobody plants mustard. It's a weed. It's invasive. You can't get rid of it. It's ugly and it's scruffy. And the reign of God is like this how?

It's interesting: when Mark wrote this parable he said the seed grows into a bush. Matthew writes later. In his gospel it says it grows into a bush that becomes a tree. Don't ask me how that happened. Luke goes straight to truth. He just says it grows into a tree. It keeps getting bigger, because we like big. We like successful. “How many members go to your church?” “How much did your business take in last year?” “How many games did you win in a tournament?” We like big. We like successful. We like to win. We like it when little seeds grow into big trees. Little actions make a big difference. Little ministries grow into big ministries. The kingdom of God being big.

But what if the reign of God is not like a mighty cedar, but a plain, scraggly mustard bush? What does that do to our ideas of success, of beauty, of value, of holiness? What if the reign of God really is like a weed? What if it doesn't need perfect conditions, but will grow anywhere? Like in that little patch of ground down by the gas station, or in the cracks of your sidewalk, or in the mess of your life? What if it looks ordinary and a bit scruffy – like a lopsided wild bush, or the hopelessly imperfect people in your church, or your service team, or your family? What if the reign of God is all around us right now, and we can't see it because we're looking for something big?

God's reign is a mystery. We think we know what it looks like. We think we know where to find it, and how to make it happen. And then: *Surprise!* In God's grace, we find it was surrounding us all along.

Amen.