

Sermon: Kingdom Parables: The Mustard Seed**Scripture Mark 4:26-34****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: June 16, 2024**

The disciples ask Jesus point blank a question that I think would be somewhere near the top of my question list for Jesus saying – “So, what is the kingdom of God like?” They also asked at other times “What is the kingdom of Heaven like?” They weren’t asking Jesus – “What happens after we die?” Their interest is in this world, their current lives, and what lies beneath it all, where it’s all going, when it’ll be put to rights. For they had been taught and have come to know themselves that there is a realm, a dimension, you might say that is the mysterious source, the driving life force, and the destination of all we see and know, though we can’t see it and know it - or at least not completely. This they refer to as The Kingdom of God or The Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus himself, they sense, emerges out of that dimension in a particularly robust way. I mean, we all emerge from there, but Jesus, as the disciples experienced him, and as we profess Him was this bridge point in human form between that world and this world. You talk to him, touch him, listen to him, pray with him and somehow you have access to that realm beyond the 5 senses, like never before.

So the disciples ask Jesus, “what is the Kingdom of God like?” What is this mysterious realm of God that sources and intersects and enriches and beautifies and deepens and blesses and challenges and awakens and directs the realm of our 5 senses? And Jesus answers them not by getting heady and esoteric and philosophically complex and otherworldly, he answers them by going in the exact

opposite direction, he goes very simple and very earthy. The kingdom of God is like yeast in bread, it's like a pearl, it's like a sheep, it's like a son who parties too much, it's like a feast, it's like farmer, it's like a mustard seed.

Someone once said that a parable is less like a story that teaches a lesson and more like an invitation into a space or a room where the longer you stay, the more you notice. The effect of Jesus' parables is not so much to take something that's beyond our human knowledge and imagining and work to fit it into our human knowledge and imagining but it's using story to crack open our human knowledge and imagining to allow more light, more space, more possibility and even more questions to flow into our grasping minds and hearts.

So all of that being said, consider with me something of this room that these two parables open up to us of the Kingdom of God, that realm that is somehow both within and outside of the realm of our senses and experiences.

The Kingdom of God is like this – a man scatters seed on the ground and night and day whether he sleeps or gets up the seed sprouts grows and produces fruit until there is a harvest. So the Kingdom of God is less a static reality and more an organic reality, less a place and more a happening, less separate from here and more emerging into here mysteriously whether we know it or not, with us or without out us... but there IS some invitation to partnership there with God and in this organic unfolding and becoming of the Kingdom. There's work for us to do in scattering the seeds, seeds of attention and care and peacemaking and love and creativity but there's a balance in doing what we can and allowing God to do what God will do, not expecting results in our time for one thing, being humble enough to see it as God's work and not our own, and being faithful enough to trust that God's will be done on earth as in the Kingdom of Heaven.

To speak of the Kingdom of God, Jesus tells the simple parable of a farmer and growing things which ushers the listener into a head space and heart space that is more spacious, more open, more supple than the hard fast and definite answers that the disciples were seeking. It's a space that is opened for us too, inviting us into an experience more than an answer to either know or not know, that we either get wrong or right, where there is reward if you get it right and punishment if you get it wrong. What is the Kingdom of God like?

The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed which is the smallest of all seeds and yet when planted becomes the largest of all garden plants with big branches where birds can come and nest... which says so much with so little. Again it speaks of the organic nature of the Kingdom, it's hidden source and it's gradual emergence, it's unfolding over time to overtake the here and now. But here in this parable, it helps to know a little about the context cause, funny enough, the mustard bush or tree is not really a delightful or welcoming image. The people listening to this parable from Jesus would have likely laughed in surprise or guffawed in shock. What idiot would plant an invasive mustard plant seed in a garden, that's exactly the sort of thing you'd want to pluck up and get rid of, not plant intentionally! It's like if Jesus were to say – someone took a black swallow wart seed or bindweed seed and planted it in their garden. What? NOOOOO! Don't do that! So there's an invasive quality to the coming of the Kingdom? We might not fully welcome the Kingdom of God, depending on who we are and where we are sitting?

And then to double down on this there are the birds nesting in it's branches. At first it seems like a lovely image - sweetly chirping birds, flitting around, being pretty and making things lovely. But I have to say, sometimes birds

aren't lovely. I had two experiences just this week to remind me of this. First, I parked outside of Ripley Chapel one morning this week with my sunroof open and when I came out to go home there was bird poop all over the hood and roof of my car and couple big plops right in the driver's seat. I am convinced those birds were making a game out of it and trying to poop into my car! I could just see them hidden up in the branches snickering away as I went back in for a wet paper towel to wipe down my seat.

And then later in the week Tracy and I were out on our back patio just soaking in the early evening sun, the beauty of the place, the sweet breeze, the dappled light, when suddenly about a dozen blue birds at least out of nowhere began going crazy in the tree beside us and flying through the branches screaming at one another! It felt surreal how intense and furious the eruption was. It must have been something like that that inspired Alfred Hitchcock to make "The Birds" cause it was a little over the top and a little freaky. So it's not a big stretch to wonder if Jesus had something like these birds in mind when he spoke of the Mustard tree giving shelter to the birds. If you read back one parable from the two we have this morning, it's the parable of the sower and in that parable the birds are not the good guys, they gobble up the seed that the farmer spreads on the path. The kingdom of God is like what? An invasive plant and a flock of troubling birds, giving shelter to, as the preacher and writer Dr. David Lose puts it, those we might call "undesirables". What is the Kingdom of God like?

Maybe through these parables Jesus is referring to himself as this seed which is annoying to the religious leaders and takes root subtly but grows in unexpected places and creates discord and trouble with the neat lines we've drawn around our gardens but spreads out from there as a living force of nature.

Maybe through these parables of Jesus the Gospel writer Mark is reminding his little persecuted community who is facing trouble from both the Roman and the Jewish authorities that God is working hidden and beneath the overwhelming powers of this world to grow something new of which they are a part. Maybe the parable speaks to all of us in our need to be patient with our own lives, that we only need to plant seeds of goodness and creativity and love and then trust the deeper and reliable work of God that takes place beneath what we can recognize and control. Maybe the parable is an invitation for us to partner with the Gardening God and to remain open to the unexpected and even undesirable situations in our lives cause that's where the kingdom of love and justice, peace and righteousness emerges unbeknownst to us. Likely the parable means all of that and much more.

The Kingdom of God is like this: a farmer goes out and plants seeds and sleeps and wakes and something beyond him emerges. the Kingdom of God is like this: a mustard seed grows into a large bush or tree and gives a place for the nesting of birds.