

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd

Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: June 13, 2021 Year B 3rd Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Mark 4:26-34

Title: Seeds of Hope

Focus: Are there places in which we can reflect the reign of God at work, being like a mustard seed offering an unexpected place of hope?

Gospel: Mark 4:26-34

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

³⁰He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³²yet 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.”

³³With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Parables as Metaphor

Two weeks ago, we talked in the sermon about language for God being a metaphor . . .

All language for God is a metaphor. Meaning that “God is *like* this” or “God is like this *in some way* and also *unlike* this in some way.” The metaphor is useful or describes some aspect of God, but the fullness of God exceeds that metaphor or that description. God is not fully described by that metaphor.

Today the gospel reading from Mark 4 directly presents metaphors—in this case, **two brief parables, to illustrate what the kingdom (or reign) of God is like: First. . .**

²⁶[Jesus] said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground,²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.

And the second one:

³⁰[Jesus] also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³²yet 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.”

We’ll get back to these in a moment, but let’s talk about parables in general: Parables make you say, “Hmmm, I wonder. . .”

Parables are “real life” stories in that they are filled with everyday people and things and situations—things like a woman baking bread or a man knocking on a neighbor’s door late at night or about what happened after a man was beat up and mugged and left along the side of the road. While parables are “real life” stories, they didn’t necessary happen as an actual event, but are stories in which people can place themselves or see themselves.

And though they are simple and everyday on the one hand, they are also rich with imagery. They are simple, but also deep—stories worth pondering. There is something surprising or unexpected or unusual about them. Something “hooks you,” or sounds odd, or makes you wonder.

One of the things I have said to the Bible study group that meets on Tuesdays is that there is no “Teachers’ Edition” or “Pastors’ Edition” of the Bible with all of the correct answers in the back of it. As a pastor or preacher, clearly a part of one’s role is to help explain things, but we are all students of the Bible together and sometimes the best way is to read it and study it and talk it about together. .

In lots of biblical stories there is a historical context to describe or a literary context to identify, or a historical or geographic reference or a specialized term or some other thing to explain. . . But with parables the task is more about reading it and letting it sink in. It is having something to chew on, something to think about, something to grapple with.

Parables are designed to get you to say “I wonder why that is? How do we live in that way?” “How is God like that?” or “How does God’s realm work like that?” I want to invite you to wonder with me. I want to invite you to ponder with me as we read this brief message from Mark’s Gospel and say hmmm.

This brief passage from marks Gospel has three parts: There are 2 very brief parables and then a summary statement about how Jesus taught with parables.

The parables are both about the kingdom of God. Jesus says, “The kingdom of God is like this. . .” (v. 26) or “To what shall we compare the kingdom of God” (v. 30).

- **The first parable, typically called the Growing Seed**, is found only in the Gospel of Mark. It’s about a seed that grows:
 - “Someone,” a sower or a farmer or someone, scatters seed on the ground.
 - The someone, sower, or farmer, would sleep and rise as night turned to day. . .

- And the seed would sprout and grow
- And the sower/farmer “does not know how.”

The farmer knows what to do—which starts with “scatter the seed,” presumably in the right conditions of soil, sunshine, and weather. And the seed grows. And he does not know how. It is as though the sower/farmer knows *what* to do and somehow he trusts what will happen—that the seed will grow, but “he does not know how.”

- This part of the passage reminds me of what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians:
 - ⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. (1 Cor. 3:6-7)

What Paul says to the Corinthians and what seems fitting here, too, is that God gives the growth. We can identify the right kinds of conditions—of soil and water and sunlight. We can identify the tasks or roles of scattering seed or planting or watering, but it is God who causes the growth. Thanks be to God for the gift of the harvest.

The seed grows because that’s what seeds do; in the right conditions, they grow. That’s what seeds do.

- **The second parable, usually called the Parable of the Mustard Seed,** is here in Mark and also in Matthew and Luke.

³⁰ [Jesus] also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?"

What do you think? What would you expect? Complete this sentence: “The kingdom of God is like. . .”

Jesus completed this sentence or answered this question, but before we talk some more about what he said, what do you think? What would you expect?

The term or phrase “kingdom of God” or “‘realm’ or ‘reign’ of God” has to do with the activity or intervention of God with human history and in the person of Jesus. It is “already here” in the person of Jesus and it is also “not yet” in that this realm or reign of God is not fully realized. But if that’s the general definition of the term, what is it actually like? How is God active and present in the world and how shall we characterize that?

- Wouldn’t you think or expect that to be big and grand and majestic?
 - Like the view from the top of Mt. Rose. (I talked this week with Dale, who just hiked there.)
 - Over the view of Lake Tahoe
 - Or the redwoods along the California coast
 - Or the cedar trees mentioned in today’s first reading from Ezekiel

But, surprisingly, Jesus said. . .

³¹ [The kingdom of God] 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."

Visual Context for us about this Parable

I said that parables are "real life" stories that are filled with everyday people and things and situations. But we are not hearers or followers in that original context, so we need some familiarization:

Here's where our pondering and wondering come into play:

- Jesus could have chosen any metaphor about how God is at work or what the kingdom/realm of God is like.
 - Why did he choose a mustard seed? ***Pick up a seed from the spice jar.***
 - Very small and ordinary
 - "It is the smallest of all the seeds. . ." (v. 31)
 - . . . which grows into a shrub. . .
 - Not very majestic, for instance.

In Jesus' time and culture, mustard seeds weren't intentionally planted in a garden; they simply grew in a field. They were pervasive. Most people would have considered them weeds.

I was watching a ***Food Network*** show on TV in which Chef Michael Simon was cooking outdoors and presenting a summertime menu. He served the meal with an iced tea, to which he added some mint leaves. He warned viewers that if they were going to grow mint, they should plant them in a pot to contain the growth. Because if you plant mint in an open garden plot, it will take over the space.

That's a bit like mustard seed in the Middle East. It would take over things.

- This is not the kind of crop most people would sow. Where Jesus lived, mustard was prolific like a common and sturdy weed. It could pop up almost anywhere and start multiplying. Some of Jesus' listeners must have groaned or chuckled.
- "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."
- That phrase "greatest of all shrubs" is perhaps satire. That would have made people laugh. It's an *oxymoron*, two things that don't go together—"greatest" and "shrub," like "jumbo shrimp."

The first parable in this pairing says that the seed just grows and the sower or farmer does not how. There is power or growth potential in that little seed. Power is defined as the ability to do something.

- How is it that God would choose to exercise power in this way—particularly in the second parable not as in “lofty cedar trees” as mentioned in the reading from Ezekiel or in giant redwoods or sequoias we know in coastal California, but in the tenacious pervasiveness of a field of mustard shrubs.
 - Is that what we would expect from God in terms of exercising power—of willingly redirecting power in a particular way?
- And what is that power used for? In what way will those plants grow or what will they do or provide?
 - The answer is there in the text:

³²yet 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."
 - It doesn't just grow for its own sake, or for looking pretty, but for God's creatures to find shelter and security.
- What would it mean for us, followers of Jesus, to exercise power in this way? For us to see power not as a means of self-assertion, as some sort of physical display for all to see, “This is what I can do!,” but seeing power as an ability to get something done that would be a gift that would benefit the metaphorical “birds of the air” by providing shelter and protection and safety?

The texts say that hat the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, tiny, insignificant, vulnerable, useless from all outward appearances, but explosive with potential and the promise to nurture, shade, hide, protect, give respite to all the nations, every bird of the air and the beasts of the land, too.¹

Archbishop Desmond Tutu: “Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm to world.”²

- Here's something to ponder, to wonder, to say “hmmm” as we listen to this parable:
 - Who are those needing shelter?
 - Who is lost in some way?
 - Who needs protection and security?
 - How might we participate in the kingdom of God by letting something grow within us?

May we be like the sower, not knowing exactly how something grows, but trusting that when we scatter the seed, God can use it for good.

¹ Jill Duffield, commentary in *Presbyterian Outlook*, June 2018.

² As quoted by William E.W. Robinson in “Goodness: the light of the Spirit,” in *Presbyterian Outlook*, May 3, 2021, p. 29.