

The Church of the Pilgrimage
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Mark 4:26-34

He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.” Again, he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.” With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

Stretching Exercises

It is a well-known fact that Jesus often taught in parables. Parables are short, provocative stories, sometimes just an image placed alongside our lives. The root of the word: para in Greek to “come alongside or compare” bollo, meaning “to throw” so parables are literally stories or images thrown up against our lives, held up to our lives for the purpose of stretching our imaginations, causing us to re-think what is, and what is real.

This week I got to thinking how so much of life can be viewed as a parable.

The kingdom of God is like a marriage. A marriage where two people trust each other, affirm each other, and can speak the truth in love to each other, holding each other and their relationship as a work in progress. It begins with promises made, and in time, with each new chapter the relationship grows, flourishes, deepens until people, looking at the two together, see something of God’s Spirit and God’s love there.

Or try this. The realm of God is like a family, who gathers at a country cemetery around a graveside of a loved one. They share stories and thanksgivings, they laugh and take pictures of the dogs by the graveside, because their beloved *adored* dogs.... the rain begins to fall softly upon them just as the service comes to a close and this family, despite their loss, feels in this moment more truly knitted together and blessed, deeply blessed.

Or the realm of God is like a choir, who gathers and practices and when they open their mouths to sing Sunday morning something new joins into their song making it more powerful than before:

music becomes prayer, something beyond the combination of words and notes something that speaks to our souls.

These thoughts and pictures came to me this week as I readied myself to preach. But you know, your pastor is not Jesus. Because these thoughts and pictures are not really parables...they may express something of the common life we share, but a parable generally *turns something assumed on its head*, making us think again and provoking us to imagine life, our lives, and life with God in a whole new way.

Here in today's scripture lesson we have simple elements: In both "mini parables" we might call them there is seeds and ground, and growth. The first parable introduces this idea of sleepy, restful trust. The kingdom of God is like growth that happens when we are sleeping, snoozing, at a time when we are hardly "in control".

It almost seems like Jesus here is teaching about passivity, or, at least, this hard to take idea that it is, life is, the realm of God is, not all up to us. You could imagine a fussy gardener, with a little potted plant, trying to water it just so, trying to feed it the right amount of fertilizer, repotting it, clucking anxiously about the amount of sun it is getting. There is a little too much striving, a little too much forced energy going on. The realm of God is more grace-full than that, and it even goes against our common tendency to be busy all the time, to think that whatever is going to happen is going to happen because *we make it happen*.

I can relate to this passage in a very literal way. When Mike and I moved to our home in Plymouth, we inherited a very fine yard already planted with lovely perennial beds. After a long winter, in time all these hostas, ferns, peonies, guara, lilies things for the most part I didn't even plant come bursting out of the ground and this year with the rain we had, the cool weather we had the garden is so lush and green and happy and we had very little to do with it. We just wait ...oh in time we mulch it and weed it We occasionally do water it but mostly it is not about us and our agency, our work, our contributions. This garden, this yard has, if you will, a life of its own.

It's interesting, you know, that right after this passage in Mark, Jesus and his disciples are out on the sea of Galilee when a wild storm comes up. The disciples are white knuckled, but where is Jesus? Asleep at the stern of the boat, trusting in God to take care of what needs taking care of. The disciples are holding on tight, crying out their anxiety, preparing to die, but Jesus lays his body down – with this amazingly robust trust in God he falls asleep – he's not shouting out orders about how fast to row, or instructing the disciples on emergency bail out procedures, no, he's just like the person who planted the seeds, and then rested, while the seeds grew underground.

In my first few years of parish ministry I worked with a lovely man named John McCall. John had always been a solo pastor, so it was something of a new thing an adjustment to work with another pastor.

We'd have these meetings, these long planning sessions trying to figure out who would do what and quite often, how we were doing at working together. When it was over, John would say with a rather sardonic tone "We're just bringing in the kingdom, Helen -- Just bringing in the kingdom."

I often think of John. It is so easy in church life to make lists, set goals, report in, tend to details. Our difficulty comes when we confuse all that, our ordinary way of doing things with what Jesus is calling us to. Because those things may or may not be steps on the way to the realm of God.

Do I have you utterly confused yet? I like what Wendy Farley has to say about the parable:

Jesus is calling us to a very different way of being with ourselves, with one another, with the divine, by asking us to recognize that spiritual growth and intimacy with God arises as naturally as seeds growing. The harvest will come without our having to work for it, because God adores us and it is this love that transforms the tiniest and most impotent looking seed (she is onto the mustard seed here) into a lush bush that gives rest and abode to the singing birds, just as it transforms our tiny, distorted awareness of God into a magnificent luminosity in which we ourselves and all the creatures we meet can rest. (Feasting on the Word, Year B, volume 3, p. 142)

Okay, but you know what? There is something – I am going to say it – almost obscene about the passivity of this passage *for a time like this*. Here we are, in this beautifully restored sanctuary, which would not have happened unless some people worked very hard on a capital campaign, unless people were generous, unless they gave of their resources and would not have happened unless some of our leaders, Tom Mudgett, in particular, planned and carried out this whole project. And here we are, some of us having just returned from an annual meeting that emphasized the great call of the church in being disciples of Jesus to make God's love and justice real

which means doing some real and very concrete things in the world out there... and the problems of our world are real, they are disturbing, the earth is suffering, people are suffering... so what is with this parable and its insistence on the quiet, mysterious hidden workings of God?

It doesn't make sense, it runs against the grain but then that is its beauty, it's strength. It is about keeping a proper perspective, a humility. a sense of awe if you will, just as I feel awe every spring at this yard that surrounds our house and a sense of trust, that God is indeed bringing forth growth even when we look around and cannot see it.

So, here's a confession: Every year as summer comes around, I find myself thinking of what I am going to read, what I am going to think more deeply on, so that when September rolls around, we can get off to a really great start, take all the resources of this place and put them to good use for God and God's purposes.

But what if the call of this summer is to take a little more time out in that yard, walking around on dew covered grasses in my bare feet just soaking in all this growth all this goodness all this grace? What if the call of this summer is to find a relationship with God and others that is less about striving and more about soaking up this luminous love of God that Wendy Farley speaks of, and that surely Jesus was speaking about?

I don't know but I am curious about that. I don't about you, but these parables surely could prove to be stretching exercises for me. See, I want us to do good in the world and in our community, I understand that to be asked of us, if we want to follow Jesus, but this luminous love of God that transforms us from the inside out -- now that is appealing. There is something here for each one of us.

It is so fascinating how we hear scripture through the ears we are given to hear, and through the lens of our own experience. I grew up in a very doing focused household. I grew up in a UCC church, a very social justice sort of church. The questions were what are we doing to fulfill God's purposes? And how are we making the world a better place? So, for years, I have thought about the mustard seed as an encouragement of a particular kind. Small things are important. Out of small things can come great things. But all that is all about *outcome*. I had not focused so much on those birds of the air who come to find their rest.

Recently I spoke with someone who has had a lot of loss in his life. He said I am just resting in God. I am not freaking out or trying to get it all figured out. I am just resting in God.

There is also the wonderful inclusivity piece, making this parable very UCC. The realm of God is like a giant plant that is an aviary, a place where birds of all kinds can rest in the shade and bring their voices together in beautiful song.

The mustard seed reminds us it is in the heart of God to gather us all in -- gathering us all together in love. And this love is not primarily demanding, as if we had to do certain things or we, the birds, would be cast out of the tree, or shrub or bush. And in this gathering, in community our tiny distorted awareness of God is transformed into a magnificent luminosity where we and all the creatures we meet can *rest*. Yes, out of that rest can come action. But the resting in God and God's love-- that is first.

This really, really stretches me. It sparks my imagination. I wonder how life could be different if we, each one of us, really let these parables have their way with us?

Amen.

