

June 13, 2021

Pentecost 3

Mark 4:26-34

As a recreational gardener, both of the stories in today's gospel spoke to me at a somewhat visceral and concrete level. The two places where I do my best reflecting and thinking are the shower and also when I am weeding in the gardens around our yard. So yesterday morning, as I did battle with an overgrown patch of clover in the backyard garden each of the stories came a bit more to life for me. After grumbling that I did not plant any of the weeds it became imminently clear to me - that they just know where they can grow - and they do! They require little and, preferably, no human intervention to grow. The seed finds its way to the soil and simply, and somewhat annoyingly grows. And yet - those same weeds are quite tasty to some of my backyard visitors. Sowing, growing and reaping - the repetitive pattern of plant growth. And - it is just this cycle that Jesus uses to impart some lessons about the Kingdom of God.

In both lessons Jesus speaks to the crowds in parables. In *Godly Play* we refer to parables as precious gifts - which they clearly are for each of us. But I think it important to understand why Jesus might have used parables. While they rely on everyday phenomenon - such as plant growth or hiding light under a bushel to teach lessons they are also thought provoking and push us to think deeply about the concepts. In the words of David Lose - an author who focuses on the life and theology of Martin Luther - Jesus may have used parables

“to interrupt what you thought you knew and, not just to teach you, but actually to confront you with a surprising and often unwanted truth”

So let's see if we can figure out what Jesus is trying to tell us through these precious gifts we call parables.

In the parable of the seed it is notable that the only human intervention occurs at planting and then again at the harvest. The planter knows not how it grows - he does not understand the innate biology behind the germination and subsequent growth processes. All of that is a mystery. But all the instructions the plant needs for growth are already contained in the seed - within the DNA of the seed. The seed knows exactly how to develop roots and shoots. I have to admit - every year when I plant seeds in my garden - I am in awe when those first little green sprouts peak out. We do not see what is happening inside the seed coat underground - just as we do not always see how the Kingdom of God is growing around us. That growth may seem imperceptible, but it occurs none the less. At some point, as with my clover, the growth becomes obvious. And this is how it is with the kingdom of God. And - even more remarkable is the fact that the kingdom is not only growing **around** us but also **within** us.

The second parable Mark presents us with is that of the mustard seed. And this is where I feel that Jesus really confronts us with his radical view of the Kingdom of God - challenging our limited ability to conceive of such a concept. As humans, when most of us think of kingdoms we think of something great and strong. And in fact, in the Book of Daniel from the Old Testament the kingdom is

described as an apocalyptic tree - one which grew to be so tall that it reached the sky, its branches so vast that they spanned the earth. And in Ezekiel the kingdom is visioned as being like the mighty cedar trees of Lebanon. Jesus pokes of fun at those notions by comparing the kingdom to a lowly mustard seed - one of the smallest seeds in agriculture. And in fact, that seed gives rise to a what is essentially a weed. It is perhaps in this parody that we find the true meaning of what Jesus is trying to tell us.

The kingdom of God is not just for the strong and elite but rather for **each** of us and for **all** of us. Let's think about that for a moment - that kingdom includes EACH of us and ALL of us. And - if the fact that the kingdom of God is for EVERYONE, not just some chosen few isn't enough - guess what? This kingdom is already here - as alive and present as the plain old mustard weed. If we thought that the Kingdom of God is something that will happen in the future, Jesus is telling us - hey, wake up, IT IS HERE NOW!!! Yes, Jesus has turned what the early disciples might have thought, as well as what we might think - upside down and backwards. There is nothing to wait for - there is not going to be any fanfare or parades to announce the coming of this kingdom for it is the presence of Jesus, God Incarnate, that heralds the arrival of the kingdom of God. So, we need to get focused on the work of building that kingdom right here, right now.

While that might sound a bit alarmist or perhaps present a daunting challenge, I have found, even in the midst of the pandemic, the Kingdom of God has grown around and within us. I have watched, quite literally, this

congregation stay connected to each other even with the challenges presented by having services online as opposed to in-person. The conversations of coffee hour easily transferred to our electronic platform, with all the care and concern for each other being expressed as if we were in person. We have been fortunate to have a rector who has been more than patient with all the technological processes and changes along the way, being removed from the more comfortable and familiar chapel for almost a year. And our children have remained connected through the efforts of Debbie and her group of Godly Play teachers. We have even see the start of a new chapter for Sunday School with Ann leading our middle and high school Sunday School group. More recently we have experienced a return of our children to the property as we move toward in-person instruction outdoors. As a parish, we have made a commitment to renovating a portion of the Conboy Center into a parish hall. Through the dedication of Tom, Bert, Paul and others, the work of that conversion is progressing rapidly. ALL of this is part of building the kingdom of God.

But our work did not end there - we not only focused inwardly to support Each other and the parish but we also reached outward. Almost overnight we had a pop-up pantry which has been and continues to be used by the greater community. Additionally, we have welcomed several new families and their children into our midst. And, beginning in September we will be launching the Epiphany Nursery School - Molly's Room in partnership with two fabulous contractors who share our vision for children. The nursery school philosophy is built on providing children with a safe environment in which to learn, play outdoors, hone their personal creativity and develop into caring, empathetic individuals. Of course - this

particular project is near to my heart, as it is the memorial for our beloved daughter Molly who, as a preschool teacher, believed in and practiced the Fred Rogers philosophy, that play is the work of childhood. To further our mission to serve as a place of peace for the surrounding area a beautiful labyrinth has been installed and already has become a focal point for meditation and a peaceful respite from the business of life for many - both from inside and outside of the parish.

You see - the growth of the Kingdom of God is unaffected by global pandemics and social isolation. In some ways it is a mystery how growth continues, we cannot always observe it, but it occurs as we see the fruits developing from the seeds. Does this all mean that our work is done? Hardly. We must remain steadfast in our quest to further the causes of racial equality as well as remaining a welcoming parish for those identifying as LGBTQ. We must continue to use our resources to help those less fortunate, those who are suffering economically, physically, emotionally or spiritually. But - we know, through our faith and determination to live in the way of Christ that we will not and cannot afford, to fail. In the words of Presiding Bishop Michael Curry:

"Our commitment to be an inclusive church is not based on social theory or capitulation to the ways of the culture, but on our belief that the outstretched arms of Jesus on the cross are a very sign of the love of God reaching out to us all."

When you come down to it - it is all about love. And love, like that mustard seed, will grow even when we, having human eyes, cannot see it. AMEN