A.M.D.G. 3rd Sunday After Pentecost – B Text: Mark 4: 26-34

 June 14th, 2015

**Mark 4: 26-34** Jesussaid, ‘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.

**Telling The Truth ‘Slant’**

I am a little behind this year in getting my garden in order. I’m still putting the finishing touches on it. And I have been surprised at what survived over the winter – and is sprouting again – all of its own accord. Not surprising, I suppose – given the winter we had this year.

So, with gardening already on my mind – it was fertile ground to hear these parables from Mark once again about seeds and growth. This collection of parables in Mark, chapter 4, comprise what the gospel writer saw as the heart of Jesus’ teaching about the Kingdom of God. But before we explore the readings for what God may be saying to us today – I’d like to talk a bit about parables themselves – and the difference between a *fable* and a *parable*. Both are stories – but differ in intent. A *fable* is primarily ‘didactic’ – a story meant to offer some insight and instruction about life. It’s handy when you want to give kids some good advice or teach them some moral or practical lesson. Think of Aesop’s Fables, and the story of the ‘Tortoise and the Hare’. What lesson does it teach us? (*slow and steady wins the race*). Or what about ‘The Boy Who Cried Wolf’? (*honesty is the best policy*).

A parable, on the other hand – doesn’t just teach us something – but actually causes us to think – and think hard. It’s been said that as soon as you think you understand what a parable *means* – you probably don’t! I don’t know if Emily Dickinson had parables in mind when she wrote her poem on telling the truth ‘slant’ – but she just might have:

 **Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
 Success in Circuit lies
 Too bright for our infirm Delight
 The Truth’s superb surprise
 As Lightning to the Children eased
 With explanation kind
 The Truth must dazzle gradually
 Or every man be blind —**

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Jesus describes the coming Kingdom of God in parables because he knows the reality it introduces is unexpected and that his hearers can’t really take it in all at once. Parables, as Eugene Peterson has said, are in this sense like narrative time bombs. You hear them – *tick* – wonder about them – *tick* – think maybe you’ve got it – *tick* – and then as you walk away – *tick* – or over the course of the next day or so – *tick* – all of a sudden the truth Jesus meant to convey strikes home – ***boom!*** – almost overwhelming you with its implications or, as Dickinson put it - blinding you with its vision.

Jesus conveyed just such truths in today’s two parables on seeds and growth. But in order to hear them as Jesus intended – he not only had to tell them *‘slant’* – we need to hear them *‘slant* – with an attitude of openness and curiosity – prepared for them to change us in some way. It is, of course, exactly

where the disciples got all tangled up – wanting Jesus to tell them exactly what he meant, and what they should do. But *he* wanted them to think about it – and let it grow slowly in their hearts and minds.

Eugene Peterson – who was Professor of Spiritual Theology at [Regent College](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regent_College)  until retiring in 2006 – has a wonderful paraphrase of this passage in his book ***The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language.*** He writes: *With many stories like these, Jesus presented his message to them, fitting the stories to their experience and maturity. He was never without a story when he spoke. When he was alone with his disciples, he went over everything, sorting out the tangles, untying the knots".*

Jesus begins the first parable by saying, *“The Kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground.”* You notice that Jesus uses the word ‘*scatter*’ rather than ‘*sow*’. The Greek word literally means that the seed is cast here and there – with no thought to where it may fall – on fertile earth or barren ground. And then the man simply walks away and waits to see what happens. I found it interesting that here - the Greek word used in the original text can be transliterated as ‘’*automated*’ or ‘*automatic*’ – emphasizing a complete lack of manipulation or control of the results. The man simply waits until the grain is ripe – letting nature take its course – and then harvests it.

What, then, are we to make of this parable? What do you think Jesus was trying to say? Again – if we try to hear the truth ‘slant’ – we must approach it with curiosity and openness. It *might* be about the wonder of faith and the need to be ready to bring in the harvest. *Or* – it might be about our inability to control everything – especially God – and that life and faith can only be received as gift. More like falling in love than making a decision. I don’t know about you – but that leaves me feeling a bit anxious. Truth be told - I *like* being in control. And to give that up means I have to trust – without a safety net to catch me if I fall. And that’s easier said than done!

We live in a time of great anxiety – increasingly violent weather patterns, new strains of deadly diseases, conflicts on a local *and* global scale – not to mention more pressures at home and in the workplace. And if you’re like me – you *want* to trust that God has everything under control. But *just in case*  - we often end up ‘hedging our bets’ – doing everything we can to keep anxiety at bay …. Like expecting perfection of ourselves and others; or living our lives with constant ‘shoulds’ – I *should do* this or that – or *be* this or that. Or trying to manipulate, manage and control everything and everybody in our lives.

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So – perhaps this first parable is inviting us to let *God* be in control – and stop trying to be the next Messiah. To trust that God is at work always and everywhere – even when we cannot see it – and that God will be with us to bring about something good – no matter what happens in our lives.

The second parable Jesus told, about the mustard seed, draws us into an even more difficult truth. *Perhaps* it is about how God can grow even the smallest of things and ideas into grand ones. Or maybe – just maybe – it might be about how faith demands more than lip-service – about God seizing hold of our lives so that our faith influences everything we say or do.

After all – the little mustard seed might *seem* like a sweet little image – as if it’s the underdog – the tiny seed that survives and flourishes against great odds. But mustard – as any farmer will tell you – is a lot *less* like a flowering shrub we might plant around the edge of our property – than it is like an invasive weed – starting out small and then taking over everything. If that’s the case – maybe Jesus is suggesting that faith should come with a warning. That – when taken seriously – it can invade and seize hold of you – and turn your life upside down. The writer, Annie Dillard once put it this way:

*Why do people in church seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? … Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us to where we can never return.” — Annie Dillard, Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*

*Maybe* our second parable this morning is reminding us that following God and Jesus can be dangerous because you just don’t know where it will take you – or what it will expect from you.

And those birds that are attracted to its shade? I used to assume this was simply a cute picture - a bush large enough to shelter woodland creatures. But now I’m not so sure. These birds might be the undesirables - the folks decent people avoid - the ones we prefer to keep on the other side of our street and, preferably, outside our homes. Yet across Mark’s Gospel it just these people who flock to the kingdom Jesus proclaims.

We who have achieved a relative amount of education and position and income and status don’t like much to think about this, but the original followers of Jesus were, in the eyes of the culture, all pretty much losers – lowly fishermen, despised tax collectors, prostitutes and criminals, lowlifes loathed by the religious establishment. Maybe that’s the way the followers of Jesus have always looked to the rest of the world – those people desperate enough, lowly enough, to find hope in Jesus’ message that the kingdom of God has come near.

So here’s the thing: I don’t know how these parables sound to you. But I do know how it will sound to everyone – established or not, longtime member or first time visitor – who is struggling, who does not feel accepted, who wonders about the future, or who has experienced significant loss or rejection.

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Because in these parables Jesus reminds us that the Kingdom of God is not dependent on us – on how good we are, or how well we manage the life we live. The Kingdom Jesus proclaims has room for everyone. It overturns the things the world has taught us are insurmountable and creates a new and open – and for this reason perhaps a bit frightening – future. This is, in short, a threatening word for any and all who believe they are “self-made” men or women - but at the same time, good news – perhaps the *best* news – for anyone who can admit his or her need. It’s certainly something to think about anyway – isn’t it?!!!!