

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – June 14, 2009**

Ezekiel 17: 22-24; Psalm 92: 1-4, 12-15; **Mark 4: 26-34**

He also said, "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.

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### **WONDERING ABOUT PARABLES**

*The community of faith that is Knox Church is like a garden filled with plants of various shapes and sizes. Some of the plants are perennials – growing, maturing and becoming stronger year by year. Other plants are annuals – they bloom for a short time and then wither. Different plants in the garden require unique treatment – some need to be pruned in the spring, some dead-headed as the blossoms fade, some need to be left alone to trail and twine where they will. Some plants are firmly rooted in a particular spot in the garden however others thrive when they are frequently transplanted. In the garden that is the Knox congregation there may be plants that die or those that are accidentally pulled as weeds – some are thorny and others luxuriant or fragrant. The garden is not perfect – it was never intended to be – but it is beautiful for what it is. The garden has a place in the world – a purpose and position – a site of welcome and rest and renewal.*

In our reading from the Gospel of Mark today we come across two seed stories that illustrate the way Jesus taught, using parables. For a teacher who sat on a hillside and taught crowds of learned and unlearned, rich and poor, downtrodden and powerful, using the power of story was an effective way to preach something as hard to describe, let alone define, as the kingdom of God. I have heard it said that "next to food and drink, our most basic human need is story." Jesus used parables, "to satisfy the spiritual hunger of the people who crowded around him, aching for insight and inspiration."

Yet parables are much more than just a good story, or a simple and useful illustration to make things clearer. Like my little introductory metaphor, parables may make things more obscure – certainly it seems that it is the intention in this gospel to make things more ambiguous and murky for the hard-hearted and the close-minded. Parables make us think, and think hard. As soon as you are sure you understand what a parable means, you'll probably hear another interpretation or ponder some new compelling connection. Today we can still wrestle with these two little stories of Jesus and come out at the end, perhaps, with deeper insight into that great mystery of the kingdom of God.

In the age of science, we tend to think in logical and rational ways, perhaps using the left side of our brain more than the right. It seems that parables exercise our right brains more, and it wouldn't be so surprising really if the reign of God has much more to do with the right brain. Parables stimulate and disturb our brains rather than soothe or settle them. They are stories to teach, enlighten and challenge our ways of thinking so that we might become open to seeing God, ourselves and our world in new and exciting ways.

When Jesus tells parables about the kingdom of God he is not describing a place but attempting to draw us closer to the divine. The parables are about God. But because we do not think in spiritual terms, Jesus' parables of the kingdom of heaven often seem to defy interpretation for modern readers. In these two brief vignettes drawn from the rural life of Galilee, Jesus speaks about the way faith can provide those who believe in and follow him a full and abundant life.

As a young carpenter of Nazareth Jesus would have met and chatted with innumerable peasant farmers of Galilee. Seedtime and harvest would have been natural topics of conversation then as they are today among farm folk. Even those of us with little or no farm experience understand that there are many days and weeks between the planting and the harvest of a crop – time for much to happen that could jeopardize a fruitful harvest. During that time faith and patience are required. Not only patience is advocated in this parable however since when the grain is ripe it must be immediately cut and gathered – urgent action too is promoted.

The story is referred to as the "Parable of the Seed Growing Secretly." A farmer scatters seed, and it grows, *he does not know how. The earth produces of itself...* No farmer, no matter how clever, can make seeds grow. She can participate in the process by influencing conditions to encourage growth – watering, composting, and so on – but the gifts of life and growth come from God, and only from God, who graciously created a fruitful earth and gives without calculation of deserving the gifts of sun and rain.

This picture is a wonderful corrective not only to busy bees teetering on the edge of exhaustion, but also for those who talk of the world God made as if the most basic truth about it is that it is fraught with dangerous evils. The world isn't perfect by any stretch, but it was made and is being redeemed by a God whose grace exceeds our wildest imaginings. The most basic truth about the world is that it arcs irresistibly toward the justice for which it aches, and each day is bursting with opportunities to experience God's grace, joy, peace, and love. We can be confident that the home and identity we have as new creations in Christ are eternally rooted and eternally lasting, and the smallest of mustard seeds will produce something beyond imagining – something impossible.

The second parable – the story of the mustard seed is just that – beyond belief. Once cultivated for the oil of its very small seeds, the mustard plant is now a common weed. It does exceed most other weeds in height, projecting above the level of the grain it contaminates. With large leaves, bright yellow flowers and small seeds in pods, it can be easily distinguished from crop surrounding it. However, it is not as large as a small tree or shrub and certainly could not hold up even a small bird's nest. At most, a tiny bird might settle on its branches for a few seconds rest.

So it seems that Jesus must have been exaggerating to make his point. But what is his point exactly and why the hyperbole? Perhaps it is to emphasize the significance of faith. "The kingdom of heaven" is no earthly nation with exact geographic location on this planet or elsewhere in the vast universe. It is spiritual in nature and can only be accessed by those who look beyond the material to the spiritual – wherever God's love reigns. The parable pushes us to see that not only can great things come from insignificant beginnings but the unexpected can also arise if we open our hearts and minds to what is divinely possible.

As I read these messages from Mark's Gospel I was very aware of the juxtaposition they held with events in my own life. This is the end of the school year – a time of graduations for many – a time to look back remembering the seeds once planted, to recognize the fruit that is ripening and to imagine the abundant harvest to come. As I sat those many hours at Ian's grad ceremony I thought of the young men and women I taught at seven, eight and nine years of age who have now completed high school. I wondered about the seeds I had help to sow and the fruit that might be borne. I thought of my sons – once tiny, now men – how much we have depended on faith in God's grace to keep us patient all these years! I had lots of time to muse on Wednesday night so I thought also of the seeds of knowledge and faith that have been sewn in me and how God is working unseen to create the harvest. What seeds of faith are you continuing to scatter as you journey each day?

And the continual sowing of seeds is important to understanding the metaphor of the mustard seed. This parable speaks of a kingdom that remains lowly despite its miraculous extension. The mustard plant is an annual – each year its seed must be sown anew. How appropriate to this time of year when everyone is watching the seeds of vegetable sprout and grow into the produce for this summer's table! Each year we must plant to harvest. I prefer the idea of perennial plants and see them as somehow stronger – stable and enduring, but many of the plants that I love – spinach, lettuce, beets and broccoli – all need to be renewed each season. The perpetuation of the mustard plant depends on renewed sowing and its perennial promise depends on the life of the seed. What does this tell us about our own learning? What does this point to in our journey of faith? If the kingdom is like the mustard seed, we can never stop sowing!

Jesus spoke in parables to reveal the kingdom of God but to reveal it as mystery. He does this by drawing attention to the mystery and miracle in commonplace activities and events. We don't need to define or explain away the mysteries of God in dull and lifeless language or in cryptic commentary. Rather, the teaching of Jesus invites us to see and to hear God in the familiar – in everyday events – through well-known passages of scripture – as we engage our regular routines of work and play and hobby. These stories of life are opportunities for the commonplace to waken our minds and hearts to wonder as we seek to learn of the kingdom of God. **Amen.**