

Sunday, June 17, 2018
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 6 (Year B)
Mark 4.26-34
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Today in our Gospel reading, we hear Jesus give two parables that are designed to answer a simple question – “What is the kingdom of God like?” Piece of cake. Jesus seeks to explain the kingdom of God using agricultural imagery. Imagery that would have been well-known to the people of his day. The first is the parable of the growing seed and the second is the parable of the mustard seed.

As an aside, it should be noted that neither of these short images are really parables. Parables are simple stories, with some sort of developed plot, that are designed to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson. They are designed to challenge us to think about our lives, spiritual or otherwise, in new and transformative ways. Neither of today’s images really fit the bill. There is no plot. Neither address a moral or spiritual lesson. Neither seek to challenge us to new ways of living, at least on the surface. Rather, today’s images are actually similitudes – streamlined similes describing a key truth with no developed plot. They are meant to convey an image to help us understand a truth about our life in God. There is no challenge involved, except possibly the challenge of translating and understanding what is being conveyed. It may be splitting hairs, but, you know me – once and engineer, always an engineer. And we engineers want to make sure things are put in the right box.

And another thing to be understood about these stories, and about Mark’s Gospel in general, is what Mark means when he talks about the kingdom of God. Whenever dealing with this subject, the question becomes whether the kingdom of God has been instituted with the appearance of Jesus Christ or whether it is yet to be instituted. In other words, whether this kingdom is a present reality or something yet to come in the future. Well, the answer is “yes.” Our understanding is that the kingdom of God is, as we sometimes say, already and not yet. The kingdom of God is present even now, having begun with the coming of Jesus, with his life and ministry, with his teachings and activity, with his death and resurrection. But as of yet, the kingdom of God has not been brought to fruition. It is still in the process of growing, just as seeds grow into plants. Complete fruition, the harvest, will occur at some point in the future, although we know not when.

With respect to our current Gospel, the kingdom of God has a specific meaning. It is Mark’s language for God’s presence and activity here on earth. Here and now. So this is the stage for today’s similitudes. From this standpoint, the kingdom of God is not a place per se, but rather an encompassing of how God is being and what God is doing among us. In other words, Jesus is answering the question, “what does God’s presence and activity look like right here, right now?”

When using the image of the growing seed to answer that question, we often get hung up on dissecting the story. Looking at the elements – seed, earth, sower – and trying to determine just what the seed represents? What does the earth represent? And who is the sower? We can

drive ourselves crazy doing that. Because no matter where you focus your attention, you can run into pitfalls. Because Jesus was not talking about the individual components of farming imagery. Remember, he is trying to describe what the kingdom of God is like. He does not say it is like a seed. Or the earth. Or the sower. What he describes in this imagery is a process entailing various elements. The process of the seed being planted. Of the seed growing. Of the grain being harvested. But the important thing is that it is about growth. That it is a process.

And so it is with God's kingdom. With God's activity here and now. It's an ongoing process. One of sowing the Word of God. Of sowing God's love. Of sowing good works. And these are done by God. By Jesus. And even by us and by others. And once the Word or the love or the works are put into place, we wait. We wait to see what comes of what has faithfully and lovingly been done.

What the first similitude seeks to convey is that this is an ongoing process that we do not and cannot fully understand. That, as we hear, the seed that is planted sprouts and grows, we know not how. The process of growth of the kingdom is a complex one that takes time. It is a Divine mystery that moves automatically to harvest and frankly, does not depend on human effort.

While this similitude is clear that the growth of the kingdom of God is a process that is not dependent on us, it does not specifically address what humans can or should do, other than watch and wait. Even so, it can be inferred that we might just have a part to play. Otherwise, why are we even here? As children of the kingdom, we are called to plant the seeds of Christ's word and of God's love through our own ministries. We even, like a farmer, seek to nurture and care for what we have planted. Yet, we know that we ultimately do not understand the process by which growth occurs. We just trust that it does and that it will, by the grace of God.

This is the key point our first similitude conveys about the nature of the kingdom of God as it currently exists. The similitude of the mustard seed gives us additional insight into this kingdom of God that is already and not yet.

Here again, there is a caveat. A common notion is that the story of the mustard seed is about our faith. This is a conflation of the current similitude with the meaning of other references in Matthew's and Luke's Gospels about having faith the size of a mustard seed and the ability to move mountains or mulberry trees, depending on which Gospel you read. These are different images altogether. What Jesus is saying in today's Gospel is, again, an image about the nature of the kingdom of God as it exists here and now. Not about the magnitude of our individual faith.

One of the key points is in the image of the smallest of seeds becoming the greatest of plants. Now, in truth, the species of the mustard plant common in Jesus' time neither technically had the smallest seed, nor did it grow large branches like modern trees. Jesus sees the power of God better likened to a tiny, trivial seed that grows with a power beyond our understanding into something of great size. He is playing on the contrast between the very small seed and the large plant. He is playing on the fact that even though things may look small and insignificant, they can yield huge results. He is seeking to convey that the kingdom of God starts as

something insignificant and becomes something quite large. And within the kingdom of God, even as it exists here and now, things that we do, no matter how small, can yield great results.

The image of the mustard seed tells us something about how this happens. It would not be something that we would have occasion to know, but the people of Jesus' day would have understood. The mustard plant was a commonplace herb. But in many ways, it was more like a weed. Once it takes root, the mustard plant grows wildly and uncontrollably, spreading rapidly, taking over with wild unpredictability. Jesus is declaring his confidence that the work he has begun in his own ministry will continue to grow, sustain life, and bring new life. He is declaring the certainty of the growth of the kingdom that is occurring and will continue to occur. That it will spread as weeds spread, becoming entrenched in all areas, given sufficient time. And it says something about how the kingdom will grow. In wildly unpredictable ways. Ways that we cannot even imagine. Or as Lutheran pastor David Lose notes, God's reality, like the mustard plant, bursts out of control.

But even in this out of control reality, Jesus tells us that the kingdom is like the mustard plant which, as it grows, provides a place of shade and for nesting for the birds. Telling us that the kingdom of God is all about providing a place of shelter and care and nurture. That the kingdom of God is a pleasant and wonderful reality. And it will be even more so when it is brought to its fruition.

Perhaps the hardest part for us who live in this already and not yet kingdom, is the watching and waiting. Like the sower in our first similitude, between planting and harvest, we must be patient, watching and waiting for growth and for the time of harvest. In our goal-oriented society, with its emphasis on productivity, we can have a hard time with being patient and waiting for the seeds of the kingdom, the seeds of our own ministries, to grow into something visible.

But Jesus' words to us today assure us that even when we may not see it, God is there. God is active. God is shaking things up. God is active in our lives, in our parish, in our ministries. And the promise is that God will bring that work to completion.

As we wait, we are called to sow the seeds of God's love wherever we can. We are called to watch and wait for the growth to occur. To watch and wait for the time of harvest. During this time of waiting, we are called to delight in the mystery as it unfolds, slowly but surely, often in wild and unpredictable ways. Knowing that the results will be grand and glorious.