

“Don’t Forget to Water the Plants”

Mark 4: 24-36

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Parables are tricky. They are deceptively tricky. I feel about parables the same way I feel about art. I know just enough about art to be dangerous in a museum. I can identify the major artists and styles of paintings like impressionism, cubism, and abstract. I can describe the particulars of a painting—the colors and the shapes and the figures that make it up, but if you and I were to stand in front of any particular painting, we would probably come up with two different interpretations of what that particular painting means. And, if the artist were to stand with us, we might hear that their intention was totally different than what we interpreted it as. In art, as in parables, there is a wide variety of interpretation. Often this is not one correct way of explaining the meaning it, but instead many variations of correct, depending on how you look at it.

Parables are the stories many of us have heard over and over again throughout our lives: the prodigal son, the lost sheep, the good Samaritan. Sound familiar? They are the most commonly repeated stories that Jesus told, so you wouldn't think they are all that tricky. But when you think about it, it makes sense: a parable is an illustration that helps explain a concept that is not easily explained. Even though we may be able to recount the details of the story, it doesn't make the meaning of the parable any more easy to interpret. That's because, like art, there is often more than one interpretation. In fact, if you were to take a parable and say, “This is what it means—no more, no less!” you would be missing the point. There are supposed to be many interpretations. They are supposed to be complex.

Parables were not told to give us a definitive answer—but instead, also like art—they were told to open our imaginations. They were meant to lead us to new ways of seeing things and thinking about ideas, but instead of telling us the answer, they offer us an image and let the listener see where it takes

them. They allude to a new truth, or a new way of being, but they don't reveal everything. It's what makes them so compelling, and if you happen to be preaching on them, so difficult to fully capture. The more familiar we are with them, the more we need to remember that there is not one simple meaning behind it.

The parable of the mustard seed might be one of the most familiar parables. It's found on bumper sticker slogans proclaiming "I only need the faith of a mustard seed" and even served as the inspiration for the name of a popular cafe here in Glastonbury. We often read it and declare that because a tiny mustard seed grew into a big bush, it must mean that God can take small ideas and turn them into something great, or even if we only have a tiny bit of faith, it can be transformed into something big and powerful. And that's all true, but that's only one part of it.

The parable of the mustard seed, just like the parable of the scattered seed that we heard right before it, is about the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is the ways in which we see evidence of God in our world—those moments and places and people where God is working and bringing about love, mercy, and justice. It appears in many forms and in many places and, like God, it is too great to capture with one description or illustration. It cannot be fully tamed. This is why the mustard seed makes such a great illustration for the kingdom of God. The mustard seed starts out tiny, but it doesn't stay that way. A mustard plant is not a decorative shrub you would want to add to the border of your yard or carefully place in your garden. Mustard plants most commonly grow wild. And where they grow, they spread. When you see a mustard plant, you do not usually just see one, but instead you are more likely to see a whole field full of them, its branches full of bright yellow flowers overpowering anything else that might be growing around it. That is the kingdom of God. You see one thing, like a tiny little mustard seed, and instead you get a whole field of growth that is much more expansive than you expected.

What struck me about the two parables from today is the mystery of the how this comes to be. Just as there is not one easy explanation for what each parable means, there is not one easy explanation

for how that mustard seed is transformed into a field of large billowing bushes. There is not one easy explanation for how the work of the kingdom of God comes to be.

The first parable actually says this: “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.” We do not know how. The kingdom of God takes us to the intersection of what we know and what we don't know. We are able to see God's work around us, but we can't always explain how it has come to be. Or other times, we work hard to live in such a way that makes room for God in the world—caring for others and dedicating our time and energy to important ministries—but even with the hardest of work, we can't predict what will result in something that is meaningful for others or ends up transforming lives or communities. There is a tension of knowing and not knowing, or a moment when we have done all that we can until we have to let go, hoping and trusting that God will do the rest of the work, even if we can't understand it.

The seed would sprout and grow, and we do not know how. The kingdom of God sprouts and grows, even when we do not know how. The images of agriculture and seeds would have resonated deeply with Jesus' early listeners, but they do not necessarily connect with us as well today. Some of you are blessed with a green thumb, but when I hear that the kingdom of God is like planting seeds, I start to get worried about God's power because every time I plant something in my yard I end up saying a little funeral by the end of the season. So luckily, the kingdom of God is like planting and scattering seeds, but it is also like other things. Just as there is more than one way of understanding the parables, there is more than one way to illustrate the kingdom of God. I believe we can see examples of the kingdom of God at work right here this morning.

The kingdom of God is like two new parents, hoping to raise their son so that he is a part of a community, and so he that knows how wildly and completely he is loved. These parents have read the right books, they have listened to all the advice they have received, but just like every set of parents that ever came before them, they don't have all the answers. They won't really be sure they are doing it

right—they will definitely make mistakes along the way—but they will keep trying, they will keep loving their son and working hard to raise him right. And one day, when 18 years feel like a flash of the eye, they will realize their little baby is grown up. On that day, they still won't know how it happened, but they will be thankful to get there. Thankful for the man he has turned into and thankful that even though they can't explain how, they see the kingdom of God at work in their son.

The kingdom of God is also like a high school confirmand who makes a very similar set of promises as those two parents, but this time they are promises for himself. His promises confirm his conviction to be a part of an ancient Christian tradition, promises that mark him as an adult in this congregation. In many ways, he does not know yet what it means to be an adult, but he is willing to place his trust that his conviction will continue to grow inside him, that God will lead him, even if he doesn't know the way. One day this young man will look back, and realize that even twenty or thirty years after his confirmation day he still does not know where his journey is ultimately taking him, but he will be able to see how the kingdom of God has been at work in him.

And, in a lighthearted way, the kingdom of God is like a pickup choir, or a Joyful Noise band. It's like a group of people who bring their instruments—their flutes and trumpets and voices—and have never performed together in exactly this way, this configuration, or with this piece of music, but they let the music carry them away. They trust that even if they don't know all the notes, the melody will sing through. The kingdom of God is that intersection between when the notes leave the instruments and greet the ears that receive them, no longer individual notes, but one symphony of sound.

Although the meaning of the parables might have been different for the disciples who first heard them than they are for us today, the mystery and wonder of God and God's kingdom would have been the same. Perhaps the work of God isn't about having the correct answer, but is instead about sitting in the mystery...sitting in the place where our imagination unlocks and new possibilities unfold before us, sitting in that place where we follow where God leads us, even when we don't know where that will be. The invitation today isn't to decide what it meant for the disciples back then, but to answer for

ourselves: what does this parable mean for me today? What is the kingdom of God like? Where do I see evidence of it at work? Is it in the mustard seed, in the baptized band, or somewhere else? So set aside the interpretations we've inherited or the images someone else created. Enter the story as if for the first time, looking for the kingdom of God all around, even if we do not know how it came to be.