

## THE KINGDOM COMES TO US

Pentecost 4-B

June 17, 2018

Mark 4:26-34

We get the point. Jesus likes to teach in parables. So much so, that Mark even posits: “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.”

Now those last two verses might leave you scratching your head, because it seems that Jesus doesn't limit himself to parables as a means of teaching. There are, for instance, a lot of cases where Jesus teaches by example, possibly even through a healing or other sign. And there's the “Sermon on the Mount,” where Jesus speaks about God's love and how blessed (happy, secure, fortunate) people are, per The Beatitudes, where those who are caught in the midst of less-than-ideal circumstances, are assured that God loves them and does not abandon them. Jesus taught in many ways; so, I've traditionally felt that Mark exaggerated here. That is, Jesus definitely uses means other than parables to teach.

Then I began to wonder if, perhaps, it's all how you define parable. My earliest recollection is something I've shared with this congregation a number of times. A parable is “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” [Special thanks to my Sunday School teacher, Mrs. Walters for planting that seed. (Pun intended.)]

The word “parable” comes from the Greek as two words: *para* (beside) and *ballein* (to throw). In other words, we place (or throw down) a couple of ideas and compare. In Jesus' case, the parable takes the form: “The kingdom (or reign) of God is like...” Modern translations have adopted the word “reign” to signify that, unlike earthly kingdoms, God's kingdom is not confined to a time or place. That's a point that parables like to make as they show us things about ourselves and God and speak to the *nearness* of God in our lives. So, if a parable is always showing us that God's reign or relationship with us is “like this,”—well it's hard to imagine a time when Jesus wasn't demonstrating that in word and action.

Today is Father's Day, and one historic description for God is likening God to a father. The comparison is to an earthly father, to be sure, but always in the ideal sense of the word. While we try to be sensitive to the fact that not all fathers have acted or spoken in ideal ways, our observance of Father's Day is, as Mother's Day was, a celebration of the ideal, and the many, many fathers who tried to emulate that “perfect father” picture that is planted in memories and painted on greeting cards. Which is probably why there was quite an outcry when one card company put out a “baby daddy” card. Most people don't want to be reminded that many fathers are absent or part-time at best. No one wants to recall their dad as uninvolved or uncommitted. It might be the reality, but it falls short of the ideal. That reality can be painful.

Today's parables involve seeds and how they are planted and grow. If we read these two little parables literally, we might wonder what Jesus is thinking, especially in the one about the mustard seed being “the smallest” (it isn't) or the greatest of shrubs (more like an out-of-control weed).

The first parable about scattering seed on the ground is easier to understand, because some seed takes hold and some does not, and the harvest is always a bit unpredictable, depending on rainfall, soil quality, and other variables that factor into a successful or less-than-successful

harvest. Of course that sounds a lot like raising children or teaching or any of the other ways (including sermons) that we sow seed and wait to see what the results will be. Those who want to be pastors go to “seminary”—a word that literally means “seed plot.”

Perhaps the most interesting thing about these parables is that they remind us that, no matter how hard we try, we can’t control everything in our own environment. There is that mysterious outcome which we can make predictions about, but not determine with absolute certainty. As Jesus says in another place, “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” [John 3:8] Of course, he likens that to being born of the Spirit, which effectively tells us that, even when we place ourselves in God’s hands, we trust God for the outcome. While that might sound stressful, it can perhaps be quite freeing. Most of us did not get to the place we are today (in every sense of the word) by our own plans only. Perhaps we contributed to the formula that landed us in The Outer Banks and in Emmanuel’s congregation this morning; but I suspect none of us took the direct route.

Which is to say that seed-planting or scattering is an adventure. And being a child of God is always filled with surprises, new potentials you might not have expected, and some limitations you couldn’t possibly predict many years ago. Sometimes we don’t like that, because it feels like it robs us of control. But other times, the experiences along the way fill our lives with true glimpses of heaven here on earth and a sense of being truly blessed by the mystery. Depending on your own theology of predestination, you might draw the conclusion that God has already drawn the map. Or, you might decide that God moves among us like the Spirit/Wind that blows where it will. Perhaps God keeps the strings loosened enough that our own free will comes into play and life truly does become an adventure.

Wherever you land, know that God has *one outcome* already planned. You belong to God and nothing can snatch that away from you. In baptism, we received the assurance in these or similar words: “Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.”

The Kingdom of God is like this: You come through the water and you are cleansed, clothed anew, and united with the One who gives you a name—his name. Throughout that relationship you will come face-to-face with God; but most of the time you probably won’t be thinking about it. Ideally, you will see a fellow child of God: a person of worth. Ideally too, you will see a child of God when you notice your own reflection. And you will build on your relationships with God and those with whom he has surround you: because together, *you belong*.

In the words of the hymn we are about to sing: “Through grace your new creation lies in hands held open. O Giver of all goodness, come, dwell with us in our earthly home.”

May God who established a relationship with you from the very beginning—who promises to be your companion on the journey even to the end of the age—keep planting seeds within you, so that you may flourish and freely bear fruit, with hands open to receive and to give, because you are secure in the knowledge that you are God’s child, forever! Amen.