

Rest in the Shade
Mark 4:26-34
June 17, 2018 – Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Parables. . . Jesus the teacher taught in parables. So what are we to do with the parables? They're confusing; they're challenging; and that's exactly the point. For those of you who like it when I get a bit "academic," there is an academically accepted definition of a parable:

A parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.
(C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 16)

Now don't worry about that entire definition, but I like that last part, "Leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it [that is the mind] into active thought."

We struggle with the parables today, but apparently the first century audience of Jesus also struggled with them; for our Gospel writer tells us that Jesus taught only in parables, and then explained them to the disciples in private. We do know that Jesus was not the only one who taught in parables. They were a common teaching tool in the first century; and I suspect we, the twenty-first century audience have a greater struggle with them than the first century hearers. We in a twenty-first century post-modern world really want the facts. "Give me the facts, man, only the facts." And then there's the KISS acronym "Keep It Simple Stupid."

But it may not be a surprise to most of you that I really like the parables. I have a well-used book in my office that lists thirty-three parables of Jesus; and I enjoy "chewing" on them. I enjoy having my mind "teased into active thought"; and I believe that is entirely the purpose of a parable. Nobody has a clue what Jesus told his disciples in private; but I'll tell you that anyone who claims to know the exact meaning of any of the parables is deluding themselves. I don't believe they have an "exact" meaning. I don't believe they were intended to have an exact meaning. They were intended to stimulate thinking. They were intended to cause reflection.

So today's lesson gives us two parables about seeds. The first tells us perhaps the obvious: Seeds sprout and grow, and we don't know how. Now granted we know a good deal more about biology than the first century audience did. We understand more about cellular division and stem cells and genetics; but, I tell you, the more we understand, the more amazing it is. How does this all work? How does that little seed grow into a mustard plant? Look at a seed. Look at it

again as it's starts to sprout. I tell you it's truly a miracle. While I certainly can't explain it, I have a vague idea how the seed sprouts and grows; but I haven't figured out how the seed that's planted several inches in the ground knows which way is down to send the root and which way is up to send the stem, branches, and leaves. I asked my wife who is more of a botanist than I. She said that she thinks she once heard, but she doesn't remember. I can only say that it's a miracle; and, of course, the nature of animal reproduction from a tiny ovum and sperm is all the more miraculous.

And then, I think about these tiny seeds, and I think about a universe with more stars in it than grains of sand on earth. And what all is happening "out there" is even more of a mystery. Within God's creation we have the micro-scale that is infinitely small and this macro-scale that is infinitely large. And the farmer cuts the grain because it's harvest time; but, how it got from seed to harvest, he really doesn't have a clue.

And our first parable leads directly into the second, also a brain challenge. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, the smallest of seeds that grows into a great plant. Now, if we want to get picky, mustard seeds are small, yes; but there are certainly seeds that are smaller; and there are plants that are a lot larger than mustard. But then, Jesus was a carpenter, not a farmer. So let's not let our twenty-first century desire for exactness get in the way of our reflection on the parable. As I've reflected on this teaching over the past weeks, I've drawn two thoughts.

First, as disciples of Jesus Christ, as followers in "the way," we are called to plant some seeds. Indeed growth in the kingdom is contingent on disciples planting seeds. I do a lot of "seed planting" and frequently, I have no idea if anything will grow. I officiated at a wedding a few weeks back for an unchurched couple; and a few days before that I did a memorial service for the son of an unchurched lady. I am generally very willing to minister to unchurched people. Now, I don't expect any of these people to immediately become active church members; but I pray that I have planted some seeds, that somewhere... sometime in the future something will grow; and I well know that sometimes it will and sometimes it won't. In past years I have served on the Religious Studies faculties of both Baldwin Wallace and John Carroll Universities. When teaching undergraduate 18 to 20 year old students, I quickly became aware that I was the first real contact that some of these young adults had with Christianity. That's an awesome responsibility – I represented Christianity to some of these people. And what did I attempt to do? While working in an academic setting, I tried to plant some seeds, seeds that I knew would not immediately grow; but hopefully, prayerfully, some of them would grow at some time in the future; because growing seeds is how we grow the kingdom on earth.

And still, as I say that, I recognize this is God's kingdom. And while, as disciples of the risen Christ, we may try to nourish that kingdom, we may try to

bring others into an understanding and a love of the kingdom, the kingdom is here. As I said a few weeks ago, the companion is always here. The companion, the Spirit of the living Christ, is always with each and every one of us, whether we know it or not. And so, the planting of seeds is more about an awareness than a creation.

But there's a second part to this parable, and it's a part that I had never thought about until I started work on this sermon: The branches [of the kingdom] are so large "that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." And my mind again was "teased into active thought," and I started "chewing" on this; and I thought, "That's us." We are those birds of the air. We are the ones invited to nest in the shade of the kingdom. The kingdom provides us with protection and shelter from the hot sun and the cold rain of everyday life. The kingdom provides us with comfort and peace. As followers of the risen Christ, we are aware of the power, the protection, and the love in the shade of God's kingdom; and it's out of that understanding that we are called to plant some seeds, to bring others into the loving embrace of God, to bring others out of the hot sun, into the shade of the kingdom.

A few weeks back, I attended the memorial service for a friend of mine, a man named Rich. Rich had never been to seminary. He had no formal religious education, although he had personally studied his bible and bible commentaries extensively, and had first taken and taught several Disciple Bible Study courses. But Rich planted more seeds than anyone I know, clergy or lay. Rich spent two days/week building Habitat for Humanity homes; and Rich took an active interest in the future homeowners. Rich went on Youth Mission Trips, and took an active interest in the youth – following up on all of their activities. Rich helped teach confirmation classes, and several youth commented that Rich was the reason they were in church. If someone new moved into the area, Rich was there to bring food. If someone needed help, no matter what the help, Rich was there. And he was there with such a smile on his face, and such a friendly nature that one could not help being glad to have encountered him.

Friends, the kingdom of God on this earth is a little brighter, a little stronger, and a little more loving because of Rich and people like him. Now, as I say this, I recognize that we have several people like Rich in this congregation. I have repeatedly said that this congregation is very generous with both their time and their money; and I truly thank God for that. And still, I challenge each of us, whether you're nine years old or ninety-nine years old, to ask yourself what seeds are waiting for you to plant? Where are you being called to serve in the name of Christ? Friends, we are called to plant the seeds. Then we trust that God will do the watering and God will provide the harvest; and, because we trust God, we know that harvest will be plentiful.

Thanks be to God for the wonders of God's kingdom; and praise be to God for the opportunity to plant some seeds.

Let us pray. . .

Holy Lord,

Let us plant some seeds.

Let us rest in the shade of your kingdom;

and, let us bring others into the comfort and peace of that shade.

Amen.

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