

June 17, 2018  
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost  
Pastor Heidi M. Rodrick-Schnaath

It has been suggested that perhaps the reason our first parable today isn't known very well is because it isn't very interesting. There isn't a lot of action. It's not like the parable that Jesus told earlier that day. That was the one about the guy who scattered seed all over the place- rocky ground, thorny ground, the sidewalk in front of his house, the street out in front of the farm, and then in some nicely fertilized planting beds. That parable is all about how people receive the good news of the kingdom of God. After which, Jesus explains the whole thing in detail to his disciples.

But today's parable – not so much.

Mark is the only evangelist to record this story. Again, it may be because it's kind of boring. There's no action. No funny bits. No surprises. It's like the seed planting experiments you did in elementary school. You put dirt in a paper cup. You plant your bean seed. You water the bean. You talk to the bean. You make sure the bean gets sunshine and everything goes just like it was planned. The bean sprouts and begins to grow. Whether you whether you understand germination or photo synthesis or anything at all about plants, the beans grow.

In other words, Jesus says that the kingdom of God is going to happen, whether we do anything to tend it or not. It's simply going to happen. God's reign is going to take root in big ways out in the world and in small ways in people's heart, but whatever happens, we have no control. Jesus says, it will grow gradually and automatically. The Greek word that is translated to say the ground "produces of itself" is the same root word as the English word automate. So, the kingdom of god, kind of like that bean seed you planted in grade school, will grow so subtly that you may not even notice it's growing, but it will grow, and it will produce fruit, because that's what it does. That's its nature.

Jesus also says, that it's like putting a light on a lampstand. It's so obvious! Of course that's where you put a light! Seeds are meant to grow and lights are meant to shine and the kingdom of God is meant to expand and develop even if nobody is paying attention.

Jesus would like us to pay attention, though. He'd like us to help when we can. Scatter seed. Do a little watering. Check to make sure the plants are getting enough encouragement and light.

+ + +

The second parable that we heard today can be found in Mark, Matthew and Luke. It's a lot more popular and there's a lot more to the story. It's about mustard seeds. Did you ever have one of those mustard seed necklaces or keychains? was a little ball of glass with a yellow mustard seed inside. It was the same kind of mustard seeds that we use for making pickles or mustard. You can buy the same mustard seeds at Giant in the spice section. But Jesus wasn't talking about those mustard seeds.

First, he says, the kingdom of God isn't like any ordinary seed. It's like a mustard seed. Which was really kind of funny because where Jesus lived, they didn't plant mustard seeds. It wasn't a cash crop. It was a weed. It's kind of like comparing God's reign to dandelion seeds. You don't need seeds to get dandelions.

Mustard plants could pop up just about anywhere and they did. They could get pretty big, maybe even ten feet tall under the right circumstances. And they were useful because mustard was used in cooking and for medicinal purposes. But again, it wasn't a cash crop. It's not a remarkable plant. Not an heirloom seed to be collected and treasured, but it grew. And it grew a lot. And it grew everywhere. Kind of like dandelions.

*With what can we compare the kingdom of God?* Dandelion seeds. They go wherever they want and they are hard to get rid of. They just show up everywhere.

The other funny thing Jesus says in this parable is that the tiny mustard seed grows up to be “the greatest of all shrubs.” This had to have gotten a good laugh from the audience. If you look it up, the kind of plant Jesus was talking about can grow tall. It can be dense, but it’s not shrubbery.

This is one of those times when the people who print Bibles should put a footnote that says, “Jesus was being funny. He wasn’t serious.” Odds are good he said it with a big grin on his face because mustard plants don’t make great shrubs, but Jesus wasn’t trying to teach his followers about shrubbery. He was teaching them about greatness.

Jesus could have used the cedar tree as an example for “what’s the kingdom of God like.” That’s what the Lord does in our first reading. The Cedars of Lebanon get lots of face time in the Bible, but Jesus says the mustard seed grows into the greatest of all shrubs.

The parable of the mustard seed tells us that the kingdom of God is not going to show up with a lot of grand fanfare. Instead it’s going to show up every day in ordinary kinds of ways. It’s going to take over inch by inch, but boy will it grow! Some people might think it’s a nuisance. Others may think that a little goes a long way, but then there will be those like the birds, who will need a home that is safe. There will be some who find that it provides healing and nourishment and even a bit of spice for daily life.

The parable of the mustard seed encourages us to see that God is at work in the ordinary and the everyday. And like a fast-growing weed – it will get into everything,

In the same way that Jesus asks us to change our sense of what it looks like for a bird to be shadowed by a majestic tree, he asks us to rethink the way we see what’s significant in the world around us. He wants us to understand that the greatest will become the servant of all and the mightiest could be relegated to the last place in line. The kingdom of God isn’t run along the same lines as any other kingdom. God’s kingdom will mess with all the expected rules and regulations. Like dandelions, it will scatter far and wide

New Testament professor Mark Skinner says “Like a fast-replicating plant, it will get into everything. It will bring life and color to desolate places. It will crowd out other concerns. It will resist our manipulations. Its humble appearance will expose and mock pride and pretentiousness like a good burlesque show. As a result, some people will want to burn it all down in a pointless attempt to restore their fields.”

+ + +

One of the interesting things about Mark’s telling of the gospel is that all through the story, Jesus asks for his identity to be kept a secret. The demons are warned not to tell. The disciples are asked to keep it a secret. Again, and again Jesus tells the people that he helps, to keep it to themselves. Don’t tell anyone that he is the messiah, the chosen one of God. In contrast, these two parables give reassurance that no matter how dicey things seem- no matter how unpopular Jesus’ cause might get- regardless of who is for him and who is against him- the kingdom of God will happen. It will grow. It is sustainable. God is not about to let it fail.

And sometimes, it will show up where you least expect it.

Having said that, I’d like to say a couple of things about the conversation that has been playing out in the news this week regarding the Biblical understanding of law and government. If you missed the news stories, just google *Romans 13* or check out any national news source you like. Please understand, I don’t want to get into a political conversation, but I think that it’s important that we have the Biblical conversation. As we consider the Kingdom of God and what it is like and what it is not like- it’s good to have our facts straight. And the best way to know that God is at work – that the kingdom is at hand – is to look for people caring about their neighbors.

If you check out what the ELCA has to say about the church's activity in the world, you will find this among the church's *Social Statements*.

Our diverse witness as a church in society flows from our identity as a community that lives from and for the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Scripture teaches, faith is active in love, and love calls for justice in the relationships and structures of society. Our grateful response to God's love and grace motivates us to live lives that demonstrate our responsibility for the well-being of society, communities and the environment.

So back to the news of the day.

The book of Romans is perhaps the best example of Paul's theology and as Lutherans it is central to much of our theology as well. The letter was written to people who were facing the challenges of sharing the good news of Jesus and the kingdom of God, while the emperor of Rome was trying to end them and their work. When he wrote to them, Paul hadn't yet been to Rome. He didn't know the church there, but he was concerned for their safety. In Chapter 13, he gives them advice to obey the law of the government. He wants them to keep their heads down and their noses clean and so he says,

"For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience." (Romans 13:4-5)

This isn't the first time in our country's history that this section of Romans has been used to make a political point. During the American revolution it was lifted up by those who thought the colonies should remain loyal to King George. Prior to the Civil War, it was cited as a reason for why slaves who escaped to the north needed to be forcibly returned to their owners in the South. And in the last century, Martin Luther King, Jr. quoted Paul in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" as he explained that Christians should subject themselves to the governing authorities as they do good, not evil.

There have been countless times in our country's history and around the world when the Bible has been used to make a political point. In this case I think it is important to remember a couple things about Paul and to read the rest of the chapter. Paul was a Roman citizen, but he had several run-ins with the government, resulting in his arrest and eventually his beheading. His preaching was the cause of riots in more than one Roman city. He didn't always keep the law, but when he broke it, there was a good reason. It was for the promotion of the gospel. Preaching and teaching about the Kingdom of God, got him in trouble again and again and eventually cost him his life.

After advising the Romans to pay their taxes because – that's what you must do - he says, the commandments are all summed up in one command. "Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law." (Romans 13:9b-10)

Yesterday, Methodist pastor, Traci Blackmon wrote about how we should conduct ourselves before criticizing someone else's use of scripture to make a social or political point. She said that our criticism must be accompanied by our willingness to examine the ways we too, have used scripture to validate our own behavior. She said,

"Whether we are using text to keep God's children out of the country or out of community or out of the church...it is all the same.

And if/when we are guilty of using the Bible as a weapon to justify our wounding of another...the same damnation we speak over others...will come to us as well.

I am mindful of David's response when the prophet Nathan shared the sins of a transgressor with him. David declared the transgressor must be killed...until he learned...the transgressor was him."

If we are going to help scatter the seeds of the gospel, we're going to run into these kinds of conversations. We're going to find ourselves debating points with others, inside and outside the church. With those who are eager to see the kingdom of God grow like a weed and with those who would rather pull it out by its roots.

We need to be informed and we need to practice wisdom. When someone tells you "this is the kingdom of God. This is what God wants for the world." Check out whether the people making the claim are truly showing love for their neighbors. What is at the center of their cause? And is it a cause that you can support?

Remember the ELCA statement pointed out that we are a diverse community. And so we may not always agree on the best way to do things. But we can most certainly agree that what we say and do needs to be firmly rooted in the love of God.

+ + +

With what can we compare the kingdom of God? It is like a mustard seed, growing wildly and out of control. It starts small, but it is mighty. It is built on the love of God and demonstrated by the way that we love one another.