

Seeds of the Kingdom

Mark 4:26-34

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on June 14, 2015]

I

This is a dangerous text.

It is so dangerous that I was hesitant to preach on it today.

But the pastors and scholars from various denominations who selected the readings for the Revised Common Lectionary want you to hear these two parables from Mark 4:26-34 this morning.

Who am I to argue with their collective wisdom?

But if ever there is a Sunday for you to daydream through the sermon,
doodle on your bulletin,
or drift off in silent slumber...
well, I invite you to do so this morning,
because I fear what the results of this text could be.

II

Jesus tells two parables about seeds.

Seems innocent enough,
but if we have learned anything from Jesus,
it is that with him looks can be deceiving.

The first parable is about a farmer.

Jesus says,

“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.” (Mark 4:26-27)

You have heard them on the radio, or seen them on TV,
with their slick-backed hair and expensive suits.

Maybe you've read their books, with titles like...

Your Best Life Now,

Position Yourself to Prosper, or

*When You See the Invisible,
You Can Do the Impossible.*

They preach that God wants you to have abundance and that if you give God a chance then God will give you, well, whatever you want.

This is the perfect passage if you want to preach on prosperity because God delivers an abundant harvest to a farmer without expecting the farmer to do anything more than sow a few seeds and reap the profits.

Is this the message we want young people to hear?

“Just throw a business together and toss out a few business cards, then wait a few months and get ready to sell the business for a multi-million dollar profit!”

This is a dangerous text because **it lowers our expectations of work while raising our expectations of reward.**

III

The second parable of the mustard seed is just as dangerous.

“With what can you compare the kingdom of God, or what parable can you use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can nest in its shade.”
(vv. 30-32)

The smallest seed when planted grows into a huge tree that provides shade and shelter.

It is far too easy for us to look at a parable like this solely in economic terms:

to assume that it's about earning stock dividends,
getting such an excellent return on our investment,
that we can sit back, relax, and enjoy all the luxuries of
the good life.

But it is important to recognize that both of these parables are about the kingdom of God...

not the kingdom of Earth,
the kingdom of Wall Street,
or the kingdom of Main Street.

Scripture becomes dangerous when we try to take the message of Jesus and conform it to what we wish the text were talking about.

Perhaps telling you my fears about this passage betrays my own desires,
and I should not project them onto you.

But I know myself.

I know the temptation is always there for shortcuts,
whether it be economic shortcuts to prosperity...
or shortcuts to church growth and stability.

The temptation is always lurking to try and do less and expect God to do more...

to give only a little and expect to receive abundantly.

I am guilty of wanting to sit on my hands and hope God solves the problems of poverty, hunger, unemployment, illiteracy, injustice, disease, and everything else.

This text is dangerous because I know what it can do to me,
and perhaps the same temptations lurk in the corners of your soul too.

Maybe you are like me, and have at one time or another assumed that if God wanted to solve a problem, God would just do it.

Maybe you have been like me and decided to give only a small effort and figured God would take care of the rest,
 because, after all, it's for the church
 or it's for a good cause
 and God ought to be all for those things.

Maybe this is a dangerous text for you, after all,
 because sometimes you are content to be like the farmer in the
 parable—
 sit back, relax, and watch the wheat grow.

IV

Partnership is what Jesus is talking about in these parables—
 the seeds that are planted by God,
 and those which we plant.

When the seeds of the kingdom are planted,
 growth takes place,

It is a process that in some ways is deeply mysterious,
 but one in which, working for God and letting God work through us,
 we can have a profound impact.

These parables are an illustration of the way growth comes out of an
 interaction between God and human beings.

Jesus tells the first parable to assure his hearers—
 then and now—
 that when seeds are planted,
 growth will occur—
 and it will occur partly because that is how God designed the world to work.

It also reminds us that at the same time we have a responsibility to help not
 only with the planting of the seeds,
 but also with their nurturing,
 so that they might realize their full,
 complete,
 God-given potential.

Counting on the fact that God will always do God's part—

if we will do our part, too,
 if we will help spread the gospel, the good news—
 Jesus says that we can indeed partner with God in bringing about
 the kingdom of God on this earth.

This whole planting and nurturing business is how it happens.

In the second parable, Jesus points out some of the surprises that this
 planting and nurturing and growing process holds.

He says that tiny mustard seeds can grow into enormous shrubs,
 the size of small trees,
 so huge that birds can build their nests in them.

It is very surprising—and quite remarkable—
 that this tiny seed can grow into a bush as tall as a small house!

Jesus is suggesting that even the tiniest seeds that we plant can grow into
 enormous (metaphorical) shrubs that we may not have even imagined when
 we first planted them.

Think about the implications of this for human experience.

For example, have you ever wondered who Albert Einstein's third-
 grade math teacher was?

Did that teacher have any idea how that little 8-year-old boy was
 being encouraged in his love for the simple processes of addition and
 subtraction and multiplication and division?

Have you ever wondered about who were Georgia O'Keefe's or
 Salvador Dalí's art teachers in junior high?

Or who were the English teachers who inspired Robert Frost, Billy
 Collins, and Mary Oliver?

Or who was Beethoven's first piano teacher
 or Itzhak Perlman's first violin teacher,
 or Ringo Starr's first band teacher?

Do you suppose any of them imagined the effect that their words and attitudes,
 their teaching and encouragement,
 would ultimately have, not just on these individual people,
 but on our entire world?

It seems that Jesus was right (again).

 Someone plants a seed.

 Someone nurtures the growth of the tiny plant.

If it keeps getting nurtured,
 and it keeps on growing,
 eventually it may turn into a bush so huge
 that it changes the face of the world.

V

Years ago, reporters were interviewing Boris Yeltsin.

They asked him what gave him the courage to stand firm during the fall of communism in the former Soviet Union.

Yeltsin thought about it a minute and then said that he had been inspired by an ordinary guy, an electrician from Poland named Lech Walesa, who had started the downfall of communism in his own country.

When, on a different occasion, Lech Walesa was interviewed by a different group of reporters, he was asked what had inspired him in his struggles.

He said it was the civil rights movement in the United States and the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Years before, when Dr. King was interviewed and asked what had inspired him in his work,

 he said it was the courage of one woman,
 an ordinary African-American woman named Rosa Parks
 who worked as a seamstress,
 who refused to give up her seat
 and move to the back of the bus.

Hopefully, we'll try to make every one of the seeds we plant one of
 encouragement,
 and hope,
 and liberation.

Seeds like: "You can do it."
 "You're terrific at that!"
 "I know you're going to make it."

For you never know what great and wonderful thing might result from the
 planting of one tiny seed

VII

Let me close with this story:

Jesus had just arrived back in heaven, after his time here on earth.

Not surprisingly, a vast host of angels showed up to greet and
 welcome him.

After all the formalities were over, the angels asked Jesus whom he
 had left behind on earth to finish the work that he had begun.

Jesus told them, "Just a small group of men and women who love
 me."

One of the angels replied, "Well, they must be a remarkable bunch."

And Jesus said, "No, not really...actually they are rather ordinary.
 One denied even knowing me, and the rest ran away and fled."

The angels paused, almost too shocked to reply.

Finally, one brave angel said,

"But what if that tiny group should fail?
 Surely you have some other plan?"

Jesus replied, "*No...I have no other plan.*"

You, brothers and sisters, are part of that plan.

You, my friends, are the only seeds—
and the only sowers—
God has to work with.

So remember what you do when you plant the seeds of the kingdom.

May you plant with compassion,
with justice,
and with wisdom,
so that through your sowing
and your nurturing,
God's harvesting may be abundant.

Amen.

Sources:

Stephen McKinney-Whitaker, "Thy Kingdom Come," sermon retrieved from
<https://www.goodpreacher.com/backissuesread.php?file=13843>