

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday June 13, 2021, Proper 6B
Text Mark 4:26-34
Theme: Mysterious Growth

Ok, I'm going to be honest. When I looked at the Gospel text for today my first thought was. I'm a gardener and this is just a simple description of planting. What is so interesting about that? When Jesus started talking about the mustard seed it got my gardening hackles up because Mustard Weed is a plant I hate as it is responsible for harboring the bug that causes curly leaf in my tomatoes. So, my surface reading of the parable was not all that generous.

Why are parables hard to understand?

Parables take situations from the everyday material or social dimensions of life and imaginatively describe them in a way that illuminates the spiritual dimensions of life. So, what happens in the parable is "something like" what happens in the realm of the Spirit. Parables are not immediately self-explanatory and therein lies the challenge and the invitation.

The fact that the parables are imaginative, "The kingdom of God is like" deepens the possibilities. The images themselves are open-ended. They can be developed in many different ways. As one commentator put it, "Parables open up territory but they do not map it. They discipline the mind to look in a certain direction, but they do not tell you all that you will see."

Spiritual teachers use parables for a very good reason, most people in their ordinary life and consciousness are familiar with the material and social worlds, but unfamiliar with the spiritual. So, it helps to use the familiar to point to the unfamiliar, this is the genius of Jesus. When a listener or a student suddenly grasps the connection between the parable and the spiritual world it is not only a discovery but a revelation. When this happens, it seems that the insight is both something we have worked to find and at the same time a gift that has been given. Parables offer a kind of "ah-ha moment" that holds the possibility of shifting our way of thinking and our way of being in the world. Stories can change us, and the parables of Jesus are meant to be transformative when one is ready.

At the end of the passage today we get some information about Jesus' teaching style that is a little disturbing. "With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not explain to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples." Say what? We just get the parables but the disciples got the private tutorial and explanation lecture? That's not really fair!

The gospel is telling us that there are two kinds of audiences for Jesus' parables: the casual listeners (the crowds) and the more serious-minded apprentices (disciples). Casual listeners represent the ordinary awareness and are stubbornly attached to the surface of events. While the more serious students represent spiritual awareness, willing to dive beneath the surface to understand something in a new way and be changed. Every time a parable is handled both of these possibilities are present in each of us and as a community of interpretation which is really what St. Mark's is.

The first parable in today's reading is the parable of the productive earth. In a way it's probably an elaboration on the parable of the soils. But clearly the focus is on the good soil that bears fruit, thirty, sixty and hundredfold. (Mark 4:20). It's a process that any gardener or farmer knows. First the seed is planted and then one "sleeps and rises day and night" (aka time passes, from sunrise, sunset), then something wonderful happens the blade pushes through the ground into the open air its burial chamber broken in the thrust of a green blade. And then the process of growth takes over, the stalk follows, then the head, then the full grain and when it is time, the time of fruition the harvest is initiated and gathered in.

This parable about the seed and the soil encourages us to trust a natural growth process. Once that important contact is made between the seed (the word) and the soil (the receptive human heart), a process of growth and development will begin. It's a mysterious process to be sure but one we should trust and not interfere with. We have to give it time "sleeping and rising night and day" and we cannot control it, but we can delight in it and witness the growth.

*There is a parable about a man who sowed seed in his field and every day uncovered the soil to see how the seed was doing. He wanted to catch each moment in the interaction between seed and soil; their natural lovemaking. He did not trust the seed and the soil to produce growth without his ongoing adjustments and observations. In the end, nothing grew.

The parable tells us that the productive earth and the growth of the seed together have a pattern. One of unfolding expansion. What is required is planting the seed and allowing it to grow. Interfering with the process is not encouraged but noticing the mystery of growth is part of the process. The greater is contained in the lesser.

So, what are we to make of this parable? Becoming good earth, good soil that produces fruit does not mean directing the whole process or even understanding it completely. It is more about trust and cooperation. Attentiveness is the key, paying attention to each part of the growth when it's time once you become aware of the stalk then you will discover the head and

as soon as the head is full you will learn of the full grain. **It's tempting to think of all of this as about our own personal development but it's much more than that, it's really about how your ripeness and fullness will be harvested and become bread for others, it's about how to kingdom of God growing within you will eventually feed and nurture others.** What kinds of seeds are we allowing to take root within us, seeds of compassion, seeds of justice, seeds of forgiveness, seeds of loving care? The seeds that take root in you are what nurtures a whole community.

The second parable in this pair is, in its own way, encouraging. This parable reminds us of something important. Small beginnings, baby steps are fine, that is how the kingdom of God begins. What you know may be just as small as a mustard seed. But that is all it takes. The larger is contained in the smaller. You don't have to have it all together, you don't have to know it all, you just have to take that first step of faith, act on what you have seen of the good news and it will grow. Allow the tiny seed to take root within you. It's the sowing that brings forth the next step and allows for the growth. If the seed doesn't find a receptive patch of soil (your own heart) then it cannot grow, but if it does it becomes something surprisingly substantial. And once again, it is not just about your own development but about growing in such a way that you can shade and shelter others.

The Gospels make it abundantly clear that responding to Jesus in a life-giving way is not easy from our ordinary every day consciousness. As one person said it, we are earth bound creatures and Jesus' words are wings. The parables seem to tell us that God sees more in us than we see in ourselves. We see ourselves as small and insignificant but Jesus sees us as capable of growing into the sheltering branches of a tree of life. The larger is contained in the smaller.

Know Yourself

*There is a world within you
no one has ever seen,
a voice no one has ever heard,
not even you.
And yet unknown
You are your own seer,
Your own interpreter.
And so, with eyes and ears
Grown sharp for voice or sign,
Listen well-
Not to the words*

*But to that inward voice,
That impulse beating in your heart
Like a far wave.
Turn to that source, and you
Will find
What no one has ever found,
A ground within you
No one has ever seen
A world beyond the limits
Of your dream's horizon.*

(The Absent Foundation – Paul Murray)

This is true of each one of us. This is true of St. Mark's which someone once described to me as, "A nice little church." To be honest it made me kind of irritated, well it torqued me, "Nice little church," I would rather they had said an amazing church or a powerful church or a prophetic church or maybe I'd settle for surprising church. The Kingdom of God is full of small beginnings, things that seem insignificant to the casual observer can grow into something amazing over time. St. Mark's is and will be all of these things to the degree that we allow the seeds of the kingdom to take root in the good soil of our hearts and grow.

I've been thinking about this a bit in my own garden and wondering about this parable this week. Quite a few years back someone gave me a handful of purple and white larkspur wildflower seeds. Over the years I collected the seeds from the larkspur in the fall and scattered them further around my untamed dirt backyard, adding some bachelor buttons as I went. Some years I sprinkled in a few other wildflower seeds and sunflowers here and there. Every year after Easter I've put one or two spent Easter Lily's in the ground too. Slowly the meadow has expanded and become more robust. I've dumped loads of compost into this meadow as that is the New Mexico gardener's mantra, "Amend, Amend, Amend." This past fall a parishioner gave me some Japanese Iris bulbs and lilies that they had left over from a project. Maren and I buried those in clumps of three throughout the area that has been slowly becoming a wildflower meadow. This year for the first time it became a little magical with lot of flowers sprouting, other wildflowers spreading with white and purple iris and then later colorful dark pink lilies growing like giants 4 feet tall and flowering above and amidst the meadow of wildflowers. It's true, I worked at spreading the seeds and watering and weeding the meadow but the results are far more than I had planned. So much of it was simply gift. The gift of seeds from a neighbor, the gift of bulbs from a fellow gardener, the surprise of a friend helping to relocate some plants into this area, the random seeds from packages of wildflower seeds given

to me because they were supposed to be good for bees (since I'm a beekeeper), the birds helping to spread hollyhocks in the neighborhood and the wind blowing in Indian blanket seed from somewhere. To me it's a backyard parable, it all started with a few seeds from a neighbor and now it's a robust wildflower meadow that gives people delight and provides seeds for not only itself but for the beginnings of other meadows. In a way that is how the Kingdom of God Works. A little faithfulness attracts a little more. A gift here and a gift there redoubles on itself and makes something surprising that I could not have planned.

This is I think is what St. Mark's is called to, to allow God to make something beautiful in our midst through our small acts of faith, our willingness to let the seeds of the kingdom take root in us. As we return to in-person worship and to the everyday life of a thriving faith community there are going to be many opportunities to get involved. The word ministry comes from the Latin root for "small things," as in the word miniscule. A minister is one who is involved in the little matters, small affairs while the magister or magistrate is responsible for big affairs or larger issues.

The parable reminds us that the larger is contained in the smaller. Knowing that ministry has to do with the small things in life, the "nitty gritty" of life and not some grandiose plan to save the world is helpful. It might also help us to avoid our own tendencies toward self-doubt. The truth is that few of us, lay or ordained have big lives, with careers that make a huge visible impact in the public sphere. Our lives and our ministries seem to deal with such ordinary things that it is often difficult to grasp their meaning or lasting impact. The ways each of us touch each other's lives are often fleeting and unnoticed – the visit to the hospital, the offer of encouragement, the thank you card, the reading of a lesson in church, greeting people as they enter for worship, singing in the choir, watching our neighbor's kids so she can go to an appointment, preparing to teach a story of our faith to children, the hour-long tutoring session at the school down the street, the sermon, the hour spent listening to another's grief, the meal dropped off to a person in crisis. The scale of such activities can seem so small. We wonder sometimes does anything we do make a real difference?

Jesus encouraged his disciples and empowered them for ministry by unlocking a secret that small and hidden actions can have an enormous impact. To do this he told hilarious parables about how a little bitty mustard seed grows into something large enough for the birds to perch in.

Our small gestures and everyday acts of service are the way we actively participate in the kingdom of God. It is how we share the love and life of Christ that we too have received. It is

our active participation in that encompassing web and force-field of love and hope known as the reign of God or the communion of the Holy Spirit.

I love this notion that it is in the small things, the miniature acts of service, that we take our place in the kingdom of God. There is no act of loving service that is too small or too humble to be offered. For it is in our diving into the human condition that we discover the life and love of Christ anew. It is in the midst of doing the smallest of things for one another that the thick network of relationships is built and the force-field of love and hope known as the reign of God is built by our ten-thousand acts of love and care.

The larger is contained in the smaller. What Jesus asks of us is to be good soil, to let the ways of God grow inside of us, even in the smallest of ways. Let the mysterious work of God grow in you.

Allow God to make something beautiful within you that you may become a tree of life-giving shelter and shade to others.