

Sermon
Third Sunday after Pentecost
June 13, 2021

Mark 4: 26-34

The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed.....or a dandelion seed puffed into the breeze, or blackberry brambles, or the yucca plants in our yard.... that little seed or root or rhizome that blows away or lies unseen in the ground will persist, take hold, and thrive where you may least expect it or want it. They are all, at some point to become the bold plants or shrubs that are meant to be, in their own way beautiful, and have valuable nourishment and/or healing properties. They provide shelter and food for small birds, bees, butterflies and moths love them, they provide food for the deer that come through our yards and our beloved black bears. Those gregarious and tenacious plants get little help from us, they revel in the sun and the rain. Andthey all, at some point, annoy the heck out of us. Ah, and so is the Kingdom of God!

Mark has provided for us here in today's gospel two little parables that pack a lot in them. The Kingdom of God is like.....

The first parable concerns the surprising and shocking generative work of the natural world that goes way beyond the resources of our human effort and understanding. But nevertheless it sustains all of us. It is the amazing journey of the seed, which at the time of being sown in the ground appears dead and lies in the dark earth only to at some point in the spring of the year receive the sun's warmth and the rain; and then germinates to become the grain that is harvested. What God plants will grow to fruition, it is God's work.

The second little parable describes the shocking ability of a tiny mustard seed to become a great shrub which provides protection and space for all the birds of the air. Compared to the earlier parable's matter-of-factness or straight forward approach, the story of the mustard seed reads "like a dense novella." At first glance, it reaffirms things people have already learned about God's reign: something very small will eventually change into something much larger; also, something that appears obscure and insignificant will turn into something public and grand. Yet there is more: the reign of God won't just grow for the sake of looking pretty, or a place where little creatures will find food, shelter and security.

Those are all important points, but they cannot capture the real energy in this parable. The parable's punch comes in at least two funny things Jesus says. Hmm, we don't often think about Jesus teaching and telling stories with humour. But let's go with it!

First, God's reign isn't like any ordinary seed planted in the garden or field. In some ways it resembles a *mustard* seed. This is not the kind of crop most people would sow. Where Jesus lived, mustard was prolific; a common and sturdy weed. It could pop up almost anywhere and start multiplying. Some of Jesus' listeners must have groaned or chuckled. Imagine him speaking today on the Sunshine Coast of blackberry brambles or dandelions. Like the tasty fruit of the blackberry or rich nutritional and medicinal qualities of the dandelion, mustard also has a range of medicinal qualities. In any case, the Kingdom of God apparently isn't much of a cash crop. Yet *it grows*. It is not easily eradicated. It persists and thrives. Good luck keeping it out of your well manicured garden or your farmland. Better be careful what you pray for when you say, "Your kingdom come..."

Second, Jesus describes the fully grown mustard plant (probably *brassica negra* in Galilee) as “the greatest of all shrubs.”¹ At this point, some of his critics in the crowd probably snorted and blew milk out of their noses. It can grow dense, but it is hardly magnificent. Would you say blackberry brambles are similar? Jesus must be grinning as he speaks. He is not aiming to impart insights about the relative worth of shrubberies but to shock his listeners into a new way of perceiving greatness.

The humor and the absurdity are part of the main point. Jesus could have likened God’s reign to the cedars of Lebanon if he wanted to describe an in-breaking state of affairs that would cause people to drop everything and be impressed, as we read from Ezekiel. Instead he describes something way more ordinary and by all appearances, insignificant, and yet also something more able to show up, to take over inch by inch, and eventually to transform a whole landscape. Fussy people might deem this uninvited plant to be too much of a good thing. Others might consider it a nuisance, but what about those who, like the birds, need a home where they can be safe, where they can thrive? Where they will be content and happy.

The parable therefore depends on satire. Just as it reorients the image of birds and the majestic cedar on the mountain in Ezekiel 17:23 to birds nesting in a random and prolific weedy shrub, so too the Kingdom of God as Jesus tells it promises to turn upside down society’s ways of enforcing stability and relegating everyone to their “proper” places. The reign of God will mess with and confuse established boundaries and conventional values. Like a fast-replicating plant, it will get into everything, break up sidewalks and burst through foundations. It will

bring life and color to desolate places. It will crowd out other concerns of power and position. It will resist our manipulations. Its humble appearance will expose and mock pride and pretentiousness.

As a result, some people will want to burn it all down in a pointless attempt to restore their proper and contained fields.

Confusing, confounding, amazing and misunderstood..... Jesus used his parables to shake up his listeners, to help them look and see from a different perspective. It's not a weed, it's shelter, nourishment, beautiful, safe... Only some of his audience got it and many didn't. The ones who should have understood, the learned and leaders of the faith turned away with guffaws. Even his disciples needed the parables spelled out for them, as it says in vs 34; "but he explained everything in private to (them)." The ones who "got it" were the people on the margins, the woman suffering from hemorrhages, the Syrophenician woman whose daughter suffered a demon, Bartimaeus, the blind beggar and the Roman centurion who witnesses Jesus's last breath. No, these were people not just on the margins; these people were totally cast out of all that was nice, orderly, socially and culturally proper; or they were never even part of the in-crowd. They were the dregs of society or the foreigner who didn't ever belong in the dominant and oppressing culture in the first place.

The seeds blow where they will and the brambles choose where they will bend and touch the ground to claim their space. Like grain planted by the sower it is only by God's grace and will that they grow to fulfillment. In spite of seemingly insignificance of the tiny seeds that blow in the wind or are carried and deposited

by the birds or stuck on our hiking boots, the seeds will be sown. The presence and activity of God moves and thrives where we may least expect it.

The parables insist that the reign of God will not remain secretive, nor does its emergence depend of our “human ingenuity, social engineering, pietistic intensity, moral virtue, or spiritual cleverness.” We look forward to the day when God’s kingdom comes. In the here and now though, we see it and are it, when we look or when we act, mostly only in the small things, like when just a new leaf unfurls or shoot springs forth; a kind word said, a helpful deed done. Or.... God’s reign breaks through in the broad sweeping awareness and acknowledgement of a terrible wrong done such as colonialism and the resulting system of residential schools in our county instituted by the government of our country and run by our brothers and sisters in Christ! The deaths of children and generations of a people’s pain and brokenness tears at us.

We cry out – where are you God? Where is your kingdom. Why? Why? Why? Yet God is there, God has not abandoned God’s people. The mystery of God’s kingdom remains, it is not ours to sort out. It is, however, in the moment of realization, to be different, to recognize God’s reign, to share in renewal and blessings and join in God’s commitment to create a safe place, community and society that refuses to impose fear, control and intimidation. The kingdom of God is where there is sanctuary, hospitality, sustenance, and renewal to those who need it, no less. In the ordinary, the everyday, the unlikely places the mustard seed lies in the ground. It germinates and grows...

Parables are absurd stories. Jesus takes very ordinary things of everyday life and turns them inside out to show us a very different perspective. So in today's reading from Mark he chooses a common weed; mustard. The mustard seed is seemingly insignificant and lifeless, powerless, easily driven down under the heel of domination. Yet it proves to be the opposite – by the grace of God it *will* germinate, it *will* thrive, it *will* grow, it *will* produce shelter and sustenance for the small birds that nimbly fly into its branches to rest and nest. Ahhh...so is the Kingdom of God.

Amen