

Scattered Seeds

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Mark 4:26-34

²⁶Jesus also said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

³⁰He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³²yet

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 make nests in its shade.”

³³With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Larry and I recently spent a week with our sons, James and Winston, in our cottage in western North Carolina. James has been living there for the better part of a year, because.... Why pay rent in Boston when you can “work from home” in your parent’s place in the Blue Ridge Mountains?! We are glad he is there actually, and that his younger brother Winston is only three hours away in Chapel Hill in graduate school. It is a joy to see our boys love that part of the country as I have since I was a child, the beauty of those rolling mountain peaks, the rhododendron and mountain laurel in full bloom, the winding hikes along gentle streams flowing down through the woods, their increasing knowledge of plants and wildlife one might encounter along the way.

This year, the boys’ interest in growing things had also taken up residence on our deck. James has a veritable garden of tomato plants and herbs, growing in containers one after another. Winston arrived with his lessons from composting and gardening back in Chapel Hill and, liking things spicy, together they discussed at length which were the better peppers to grow from seed. I just eavesdropped and quietly pondered how our boys in their mid-twenties are a lot like their father tending his tomatoes and herbs, and their grandfather who harvested enough summer produce to can and last all winter. At the end of the pandemic’s long isolation, own there in North Carolina, James’ tiny little seedlings reaching skyward seemed a potent image of family ties, of children growing into adulthood, the sheer gift of nature’s wonder and beauty and bounty.

On the one hand, they were simply seeds doing what they are meant to do, in their pots on a sunny deck. On the other hand – the care for them conveyed so much more. The seeds in our scripture reading contain vastly so much more.

Common, but also precious, Jesus uses the seed as an object to help us decipher meaning, a symbol so potent it represents the Kingdom of God. These two parables take old, familiar images and cast them into new light for deeper understanding. Jesus’ listeners desperately needed

hope in something they could not see. They needed a word of encouragement during really tough times. They were trying to believe in the Kingdom of God but they looked around and, despite some momentary glimpses of glory, there was little evidence that things were getting better. The world was at war with itself in the very places where we see so much turmoil today. Jesus' followers were living under the boot of Rome. Caesar's taxes were oppressive and unfairly apportioned. Hunger was a problem for many. People with serious illness faced uncertain futures. In a number of ways, the biblical backdrop for these sayings of Jesus is not unlike the stress of our time.

Just this past March the Gallup Poll released its 2020 United States Religious survey findings and for the first time – the number of adults saying they belonged to a church, synagogue or mosque fell below 50 percent – to forty-seven percent; down 20 points in the last 20 years.¹ So too, in the first century church, religious factions conflicted with one another, and competed with secular claims for meaning, and Jesus' disciples were wondering if their community of faith – would survive all the pressures of a secular world. Where were the visible, tangible signs of the Kingdom of God?

The French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur, said that the meaning of Jesus' parables lies closest to their "points of pressure." What he meant by "points of pressures" was the place where the unexpected, the illogical, the incongruous, and even the comic occurs.² Their purpose is to tangle with us, to make us think, and ultimately to have us stand in awe before the incomprehensible mysteries of God.

When you carefully survey the ground of our scripture reading where Mark has sewn these Kingdom seeds, you realize what Jesus is

¹ Gallup. March 29, 2021.

² Ricoeur quote from Al Winn's "If Someone Gave You a Kingdom Would You Take It?" sermon from NDPC, 6/16/85.

saying is incredibly odd, oddly extravagant and deliberately bizarre. Nothing is as it might first appear. In the first, and less familiar, of these two seed parables, about the farmer who sows the seed, at first glance it sounds like a simple picture of agricultural grace. The seed is planted and, while the farmer sleeps, it germinates and grows. The surprise comes in the last verse, when it says the farmer “goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.” This happens to be a direct quote from a particularly bloody passage in Joel, known as “the war scroll,” in which the prophet asks God to wield a sickle to annihilate the other nations. By quoting Joel, Jesus is recalling the judgment of God; saying there is no going back to the old dreams of triumph over other nations. The Kingdom of God will not be like other kingdoms.

Then Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed. Now, Matthew and Luke enlarge Mark’s version and have that seed grow into a tree, recalling another Old Testament prophet – this time the promise of Ezekiel that from a little tribe, ancient Israel would grow up as the lofty cedars of Lebanon, and all the nations of the world would nest under the shade of its branches. But a mustard seed never grows into a tree. Describing the realm of God as a shrub, Mark draws a more realistic picture of the actual plant, but still this image drips with the dew of satire and irony. I mean, please, who wants to imagine that the “The Kingdom of God” is akin to a ... shrub?? Not only that, to call the mustard plant a “shrub” is actually a charitable description, even for Mark. Mustard plants were hardly popular in Palestine because they spread like weeds. The ancient historian Pliny wrote, “It grows entirely wild, and it is scarcely possible to get rid of it.” There were actually laws against planting mustard because it was such an annoyance.³

Making fun of the old triumphal kingdom dreams evoked by Joel’s desire that God join them in battle, and Ezekiel’s lofty cedars of

³ Biblical insight from David Buttrick’s *Speaking Parables*, p. 70 ff. and Will Willimon’s *Christian Century*’s Living the Word article on “The Greatest of All Shrubs, May 15, 1991.

Lebanon, Jesus might as well have said, “The Kingdom of God is like – kudzu.” A nuisance, unwanted, invasive, a weed.

These parables were addressed to a people who so wanted to realize the lofty dreams of their past. They wanted their tiny tribe under God to be a leader among the nations, and yet they were little more than a ragtag band of believers. They wanted a great Messiah to usher them into God’s new age, and yet God sent them an itinerant preacher and healer, a crucified Lord who was not easy to follow. They wanted their church to grow, and yet their denomination was losing members. They wanted their youth to commit to their institutions, but their children and grandchildren were finding other loyalties. They wanted the reign of God to spread, and yet they lived in a land where the number of people willing to claim themselves religious was dwindling. They wanted the cedars of Lebanon, but what Jesus promised was – a shrub – an invasive, annoying weed, that grows while we sleep, spreads where it will, and is completely out of our control.

These odd, ironic seed stories were meant to be a word of encouragement for Jesus’ followers, then as now, that we not lose hope, that we cease to long for what is past, that we live trusting God that the best is yet to be. Jesus invites us to believe that the seeds of God’s reign have been scattered in all the fields of the earth. The potent signs of God’s love, justice, and peace are taking root in places we will never fully see; they are growing in ways we cannot understand, but by God’s grace, their harvest is sure.

From the mountains of East Tennessee, Episcopal priest, Martha Sterne, tells a story about the remarkable journey of one singular seed. She and her husband were driving between Denver and Colorado Springs and noticed a handwritten sign in front of a house that read Fossils. They stopped and a woman showed them her shop which housed a collection of pieces about the size of various cookies. Imprinted in each was the fossil image of a fern or leaf or insect. The woman had gathered them from her backyard where part of an ancient

fossil-rich lake bed stretches across her property. Martha and her husband admired them all, and settled on what they thought were a pair of maple seeds, but later understood they were the same maple seed cloven in two, so each fossil is a mirror image of the other.

“When I hold the two pieces together,” Martha writes, “there is the one seed – the oneness – that floated down into a lovely lake thirty-four million years ago.” Had we been there, at the long-ago time, we might have said, “Oh, that seed is wasted because it missed the earth and went into the deep water near the mountain that erupted and poured out lava that sunk to the bottom of the lake and preserved this little voyager. Though it has been there, part of the creation, hidden and inactive all these ages, now I enjoy it in the shadow of the Appalachians, the oldest mountains in the world.

And then she connects that ancient seed to our moment writing: “I glimpse the potential that was there so many years ago, is now, and will be forever. It stirs my soul. I lift up out of my own strivings and sinkings and failings and I get it. Nothing is wasted. That which does not sprout in this eon may in the next – in a whole new way.”⁴

Friends, God has planted Kingdom seeds that have been sprouting through history, and in our time – in whole new way. Through marvelous, mysterious stories of seeds, Jesus speaks to us even now, planting this good news for an ever-changing church, in a changing post-pandemic world. The reign of God grows in ways we do not expect, or understand, or sometimes even want. But from time to time, we look up out of our own strivings and sinkings and failings and we get it. In the most unexpected ways, from the tiniest bud of potential, the realm of God is taking hold – taking hold in the human heart, showing up in new callings to serve, blooming as evidence of a new creation, coming from the generous hand of God. From the tiniest bud of potential, the church of Jesus Christ makes a home for us from which we are carried on the

⁴ Martha Sterne, *Alive and Loose in the Ordinary*, p. 41.

wings of hope into God's growing, spreading, invasive, life-giving
reign on earth.

AMEN.