

4 Pentecost, Yr. B
June 17, 2018
Mark 4:26-34

Mark's gospel this morning is about the Kingdom of God. There are a number of parables about the kingdom scattered throughout the gospels. It's like Jesus keeps trying to find just the right image so that his listeners, most of whom would be thinking of "kingdoms" in terms of armies, and conquerors and power, to think quite differently. So he compares the kingdom to something that grows unseen, from something as small as a mustard seed, or, elsewhere, to a treasure hidden in a field, or a banquet where all are invited. It's only been relatively recently that Biblical scholars have some to understand that the Kingdom of God was Jesus' central message. And that being the case, it behooves us to look closely at this whole KINGDOM thing – what is it? Where is it? What's our relationship to it? In short, what's Jesus talking about when he talks about the Kingdom of God? We pray for the coming of that kingdom every time we say the Lord's Prayer and in that prayer, we ask for it not once, but twice: we pray that God's kingdom will come and then that God's will will be done on earth as it is in heaven. How often have we said that prayer? What do we understand ourselves to be praying for?

As I mentioned, probably most of those listening to Jesus would have thought of Kingdom in terms of military power, which would lead to a restoration of Israel as an earthly power. "Let's get rid of the Romans and restore Israel to its glory days under David and Solomon." But that's not what Jesus is about at all; when Jesus talks about the kingdom, he's talking about that state of affairs that will exist when God's will, God's intentions for the world, are in place. When Jane and I were on our recent trip, we saw a sign in a valley in Montana that said JESUS IS LORD OF THIS VALLEY. I would have loved to talk with those who put up that sign. What did they mean – just this valley, and not the next one over? Because Jesus is Lord, not just of one valley, but of the whole world. That's kingdom language – that's what we're aiming for. And what would that look like do you think? It would look like all the things Jesus did and taught: it would look like forgiveness and healing, it would look like welcoming back the prodigal son, it would look like welcoming the stranger, breaking down barriers, it would look like that heavenly banquet in which everyone was included and fed. In the words of the BCP, it would look like that state of affairs when everyone was proclaiming by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, when everyone was loving one's neighbor as oneself, when everyone was striving for justice and peace among all people and respecting the dignity of every human being.

A few years ago, the Wisconsin Council of Churches brought Sara Miles to Washington Island as the guest speaker. She had been an avowed secularist but was converted at the age of 42 – this is what she said: What I heard, and continue to hear, is a message that can crack religious and political convictions open, that advocates for the least qualified, least official, least likely...It proclaims against reason that the hungry will be fed, that those cast down will be raised up and that all things, including my own failings, are being made new. It offers food without exception to the worthy and unworthy, the screwed up and the pious, and then commands everyone to do the same...and it insists that by opening ourselves to strangers, the despised or frightening or unintelligible other, we will see more and more of the holy, since, without exception, all people are one body – God's."

That's what we're praying for; that's what we're to be about.

Pretty daunting, isn't it? But then we have this parable, in which Jesus says that the kingdom is growing, in secret, we don't know how. And we're being asked to sow the seed, but then to trust that God is taking care of the rest. Going out and pulling on the shoots isn't going to help. Then he talks about the mustard seed, that tiniest of all seeds which, and again we don't know how, will grow into "the greatest of all shrubs." We don't understand how it's going to happen and, as humans, we're helpless to MAKE it happen. So, as humans, we live in those in-between times, when Kingdom things can be invisible. It can be a source of anxiety, really, because we can't see the Kingdom happening. Do you remember the novel, *Giants in the Earth*? It's about the early Scandinavian settlers on the prairie. There was one scene when the family was about out of resources. They had planted their last seeds and, not only was nothing coming up, but, as I recall, it had snowed and they feared that the whole crop had been wiped out. The father, in desperation, goes out and digs up a seed and sees that, in spite of everything, it had sprouted and was growing. The earth had worked its mysteries and the family was saved.

So, we can't make it happen. If that's the case, what is our response? If God's taken care of the whole thing, can we just sit back and relax? One group of folks, called "quietists," think just that. God's got it covered; I don't have to do a thing. On the opposite end of the spectrum is a group that must have missed this parable completely, because they think that if anything at all is going to get done, it's up to them to do it. In effect, this group is saying that God is either absent or unreliable – this group is sometimes referred to as "functional atheists" – they may say they believe in God, but they don't live out of any kind of faith or trust. I'd suggest that we need to position ourselves somewhere in the middle – in the parable; it's the man who sows the seed. That's us – sowing the seed, living out kingdom values in our daily lives, doing the "planting." And I think we're also called to recognize and nurture the Kingdom where we see it breaking through. I don't know if we can say that we're getting better every day in every way, but I think we are making some progress. Donald Kagan, a classical historian, has written a book titled, *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace*. In that book, he points out that the ancient Greeks and Romans knew nothing about the ideas that Jesus would teach. They viewed the world as a place of intense competition in which victory and domination, which brought fame and glory, were the highest goals. They had few hesitations about the desirability of hard power and the naturalness of war. He points out that many modern states are different and that the Judeo-Christian tradition has meant that there are now barriers of conscience to the way we acquire and maintain power. There have been other shifts as well – We achieved things like the abolition of slavery and suffrage and tolerance – those gains have come only after much struggle, but they have come. And it probably goes without saying that those gains are fragile and need to be protected because they could be lost. But where they exist, they are signs of the in-breaking Kingdom.

The second half of the parable, about the mustard seed, is a reminder that, in God's kingdom, nothing is insignificant. Each act of love and kindness is seed sown- seed that, once planted, will inexorably grow towards the kingdom. I remember being in Boston for a seminar and one of the presenters told a story about her family. When her children were small, they had all saved

their money for a trip to Boston. The plan was that they would walk the freedom trail and then go for ice-cream sundaes. As luck would have it, however, they got lost (and having gotten lost there myself, I could believe it!) They wandered around for quite a while until it became apparent that they were going to have to find a bathroom. All of us would recognize that “dance” that kids do when a bathroom is an imminent necessity. Well, she said, her kids were doing that dance in front of a house where an elderly, unkempt woman was sitting on the stoop. She, too, recognized what was going on and asked the Mom if the family would like to come and use her bathroom. Greatly relieved, the mom accepted. The woman’s apartment was on the third floor, really small and crowded, with a bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling for illumination. The need was obvious. So, when they were leaving, the mother took most of the saved money and left it on the kitchen table. When they were on their way again, she explained to the kids what she had done and why. And they all settled for cones instead of sundaes. Nothing more was said about this until a number of years later, one of the boys, who was now in the Peace Corps somewhere in Latin America, called and in the course of telling his mother what was going on, he referred to that day. “I was on my motorbike, and got caught in a rainstorm,” he said. “And a man invited me into his hut until I could continue on my way. And, Mom, do you remember that time in Boston...?” And, he too, remembering that day, had shown his appreciation for an act of kindness by leaving some money on the table.

Insignificant? Maybe. But each act of kindness, like those tiny mustard seeds, has the ability to grow and multiply. We can sow seeds that can bring life from death, breaking through dirt and asphalt and even concrete. The incredible Good News is that the Kingdom’s coming is inexorable, inevitable. And we can help, not out of anxiety, but with joy. As one theologian put it: do the right thing, then trust and wait. Amen.