

Mark 4:26-34

Jesus shares two parables of God's Reign using the metaphor of seeds. In the first, he speaks about a farmer who plants seeds without knowing how they grow. In the second, he describes how the small mustard seed grows to become a large plant in which birds can nest.

Jesus also said, "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. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come." He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we 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 make nests in its shade." With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Jesus' penchant for parables seems to suggest that speaking in parables, searching for parables as a means by which to make sense of things, is a way to be in the world, to operate in the world. There are some things in life that necessitate parabolic speech because there is just no other way to get at them. At their etymological core, parables are not linear interpretive exercises. A parable is something that is thrown alongside - *para*, alongside, and *bole*, from the root *ballein*, to throw or cast. When you place something alongside something else you have just made problematic a meeting of the two. Think of something as simple as parallel lines. They will never meet. Likewise the parables and that which we put alongside them may never meet either, as hard as we try. Rather, there is a constant alignment that forces you to go back and forth between the two. As a result, interpretation lies in a mutual, reciprocal, even circular motion. And if neither will ever meet along their parallel journey, there may be no end to what you see.

Jesus tells parables so that we might get glimpses into the meaning of the kingdom of God because of his presence in the world. But Jesus also tells parables to suggest that what is revealed about the reign of God will upend the parable we thought was just a simple little story. It seems speaking in parables is a theological necessity. Jesus tells parables not for explanation but for exploration. Not for answers but so as to engage the imagination. Not for certainties about faith but for discoveries about how faith works. In this regard, Jesus asks us to talk in parables, too. Because something happens in telling parables that cannot occur in just listening to them. Figuring out a parable to tell is a different experience than securing its purpose. *(Karoline Lewis)*

Readings Pentecost 4B COCU43B

REFLECTIONS ON THE THEME:

Both the Gospel, and its related readings, and the continuous Old Testament reading present two main thoughts this week.

The main theme is that of small things which grow to have significant impact and influence. In Samuel, the arrogant Saul is replaced by David, the youngest son of an insignificant family in an unimportant village. It is God who sees the heart, and takes the "small" person who trusts in God and makes him or her someone of significance in God's purposes. Similarly, Psalm 20 reflects on how those who trust in God know God's victory and success. In the Gospel, the small mustard seed becomes a large tree, revealing how important small contributions, commitments and actions are for the growth of God's Reign in our world. This is supported by Ezekiel's vision of the small branch that becomes a mighty tree on a mountaintop.

The second, complementary thought in this week's readings, is that God nurtures and sustains God's people and God's Reign, bringing growth, fruit and flourishing even though we may not know how this comes to be. The Gospel expresses this clearly in the first parables in this week's passage, but Psalm 92 also expresses this as it celebrates how God enables the godly to flourish. Finally, Paul's letter calls us to respond to God's gracious, mysterious kingdom work in our hearts and lives by committing to living lives rooted in Christ's love, and based on faith, not on the sight of goal-orientation or of human expectations. Flowing from last week's challenge to our allegiances, and the call to remain faithful to God in spite of what may come, this week's promise of God's hidden activity to bring growth, fruit and flourishing in our lives is a comforting, encouraging gift.

In the quest for justice, peace and love in our world, results can often be difficult to see, and our efforts can often feel like futile attempts to push back the tide. However, when we can embrace Paul's call to walk by faith and not by sight, and when we can trust that God's Reign is at work in and through us to bring forth the fruit of God's Reign, we can renew our commitment to service and activism. When we recognise that the smallest commitments and contributions, and the least significant people, can have a great impact for God's Reign, we are inspired to do what we can and not fret about what we cannot do. As the old saying goes, learning to "think globally and act locally" is a kingdom principle as much as anything.

(John van de Laar, Sacredise)

1 Sam 15:34-16:13

God tells Samuel that God has rejected Saul as king, and God instructs Samuel to anoint one of Jesse's sons as king. Samuel sees the eldest of the sons and thinks that one of them must be the king, but God tells him that God does not see as human beings do. Then David, the youngest son, is called and anointed to be king over Israel.

Then Samuel went to Ramah; and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul. Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.

The Lord said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons." Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And the Lord said, "Take a heifer with you, and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.' Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you." Samuel did what the Lord commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, "Do you come peaceably?" He said, "Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord." But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord has not chosen any of these." Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

Ps 20

A prayer that God may provide and protect, ensuring that the one who trusts in God remains steadfast.

May the Great Birther who created you in wholeness, comfort you when you call. May the Name of Love be your protection and rise up in your heart as a tower of strength! May all you have given in gratitude and with open hands be returned to you a hundredfold! May your heart's desires and all of Love's plans for you be fulfilled in due season!

Let us shout for joy as Love triumphs over fear. Let our thankful hearts sing in loud acclamation to the Beloved, who answers our heartfelt prayers for well-being.

Now I know that Love comes to all who open their hearts, and dwells therein offering gifts of peace and harmony. Some may boast of wealth and personal power: they will stumble and fall.

Let us boast of the One who comes in the Name of Love. We shall rise up strong and sure. O beloved, You who created us, You bless us with your Love, For you are the divine Guest dwelling within our hearts.

(This version is from Psalms for Praying: An Invitation to Wholeness, by Nan C. Merrill)

2 Cor 5:6-10, 14-17

Followers of Christ live by faith and not by sight, and do everything with the view to please God. Although we may at times seem crazy, we are controlled by Christ's love. So we no longer live our old life, but a new one in Christ for whom we live, and who was raised for us.

So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord - for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!