

The Kingdom of God is Like...

Introduction to Scripture

This passage comes at the end of a longer section where Jesus is teaching his disciples. He's using all sorts of images as he tells a number of parables that describe his ministry, the growth of the word, and the reign of God. Today we get two parables in which he uses the image of a seed / plant.

A seed once planted is a mystery being revealed. It grows on its own. Planters may sleep and rise, but a seed's work is automatic. The seed is like the Kingdom of God in this sense: it grows mysteriously of its own accord and appears on God's timetable (not yours or mine).

Scripture: Mark 4:26-34

Jesus also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."

Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade."

With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

Sermon: The Kingdom of God is Like...

The parables of Jesus have been said to be "narrative time bombs." (Eugene Peterson) Little ditties that are meant to undermine our assumptions of things we accept unquestioningly. A turn of phrase that offers us a vision of something different.

The word *parable* comes from two Greek words, *para*, "beside," and *ballein*, "to throw." A parable is throwing one thing (a vision of God's kingdom) beside another (the world as it is) to see what happens.

The comparisons are unpredictable – sometimes subtle, sometimes obvious. Always something to mull over. They call into question accepted "truths," making them a bit subversive, challenging us to consider other possibilities in light of God's promises.

Parables may seem on the surface to be ordinary and everyday - about everything from seeds and shrubs to lost coins and wasted money. Nothing very exotic. Ordinary things from ordinary life.

And yet they offer far more than simply quaint images. Parables are about the things of this life which, in the teachings of Jesus, become a means of grace and growth.

Parables also often raise more questions than they answer. But in helping us raise the right questions, they bring us closer to the Kingdom of God. They sharpen our focus on the life of faith and what it means to be a Christian.

The Kingdom of God is like...

Basileia tou Theou in Greek. The challenge is that the word *kingdom* seems so static, as if describing some fixed place, whereas *basileia* is far more dynamic, describing the arenas of God's activity and influence.

Some translate it as "the reign" or "rule" of God to emphasize this more active aspect of the word. When we see the world as God does, and when we act toward each other as God would have us, we are living in God's rule. That means that we can experience and participate in the kingdom of God here and *now*.

And just as seeds grow without our effort, so also will God bring about His reign. It is not up to us. We can't make it happen... And we can't prevent it. God is ultimately responsible for bringing His rule to bear and His Kingdom to fruition.

In this sense, it is more like the mustard plant that, like an out of control weed, grows and spreads and can hardly be contained.

So let's think for a minute about this mustard seed. What Jesus says here is actually not true at all. Mustard seeds simply do not grow into great shrubs with large branches in which birds build nests. Normally, mustard is a low shrub, no more than 8 or 10 feet high at best, very spindly and fragile, certainly not able to support a nest of birds.

But here, in scripture, it acts as no other mustard seed has. This exaggerating on Jesus' part is his best attempt at putting into words that which cannot be described – the Kingdom of God.

And the kingdom is the key. Jesus does not say for instance that we ourselves are like the mustard seed, which though small "grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs." On the contrary, left to our own devices most of us would probably remain creatures of our own comfort and pleasure. On our own, we **do** not have the grace to live and grow into the life of the kingdom.

It is rather God working within us that is the source of all we can become. And to that there is no spiritual limit. The kingdom of God in all its abundance cannot be contained or manipulated by humans like us. While the kingdom is at hand, Jesus tells us, we cannot grab hold of it and claim it as our own.

And it is always “like.” The kingdom of God is always found in relationship to the things and people of this everyday life to which Jesus compares it. So how can these parables, sometimes hardly more than a sentence or phrase, make any difference to us today?

A renowned scientist once remarked that one flap of a seagull’s wings could change the course of the earth’s climate forever. Jesus would have loved this image. The Kingdom of God has a similar power.

We might think that to make a difference in the world - to have a positive and lasting influence - that we need to hold positions of power, prestige, and authority. Yet none of this matters in the life of the kingdom. The effect of the kingdom at work in our lives is not measured in dollars or popularity. The kingdom of God is of a different order entirely.

The Kingdom of God is like this... One Sunday (in my previous church) a young woman sought me out after worship. We went off to the office to chat and she shared with me that she had just received a diagnosis of a rare and ferocious cancer and needed to have an operation immediately. They gave her 24 hours to go home and get organized before the operation. At the time Nicole had a one-year-old daughter and worked full-time. I was moved that in her 24 hours, she chose to come to church.

I asked her how we (the church) could help. She said, “Pray for me.” I said, “Of course. Can we bring meals to your husband and daughter?” “No, we’ve got friends who’ll do that; just pray for me” she replied. “Well, can we help with driving or child care for Lilly?” “No, my family is around to help; just pray for me.” And I kept offering all these helps, before I finally heard what she was really asking for – Prayer! She had support for all these aspects of her life and she was asking the church to do what it uniquely does and does best – pray.

With the simple flap of our spiritual wings - a prayer - we may well change a life.

The Kingdom of God is like... a young Christian in 1955 in Calcutta India, who told her superiors, “I have three pennies and a dream from God to build an orphanage.” A dream and 3 pennies; a mustard seed. “Mother Theresa,” her superiors chided gently, “you cannot build an orphanage with three pennies...with three pennies you can’t do anything.” “I know,” she said smiling, “but with God and three pennies I can do anything.”

“The kingdom is like a grain of mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth, yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, so that the birds of the air can come and make nests in its branches. It is like a man who took and sowed seed in his field, and the earth produced of itself, first the grain and then the ear and then the full blade in the ear.”

In God’s Kingdom, more comes out than we thought we put in. More happens than we made happen.

And while examples of Mother Theresa are inspiring, this seed of the Kingdom, which produces far beyond expectations, is certainly not limited to the great, religious-looking deeds people make on a grand scale.

Remember, the seed of the Kingdom is the mustard seed: the tiniest words, the little actions of every day.

The actions you take:

whether or not you return the extra change the store clerk gave you by mistake,
when you speak up against racist or sexist jokes,
when you volunteer at the food pantry.

All these things sow a seed, both in your life and in other lives.

"Scatter seed upon the ground... and the earth produces of itself," Jesus says. The sowing of even those tiniest seeds begins a process over which we just don't have control. Oh, we can step in and wreck it by over-watering, or maybe help out a little by getting the right fertilizer in the soil. But the growth comes of itself, or more accurately from God.

The Kingdom of God is like Verda Tetteh, who just graduated from Fitchburg High School. Verda's family immigrated to the US from Ghana when Verda was a little girl, and now she was heading off to Harvard University. At the ceremony she received an award which included \$40,000 (\$10,000/year for college expenses). A little later in the ceremony, she got up, returned to the stage, interrupting the principal. She said that while she was honored to receive the gift, she wanted someone who needed it more than she did to have it. (She'd already received scholarships from Harvard and they simply didn't need the money.)

What makes this more than a feel-good story is her Christian faith. She said in an interview that she credits God with providing for her family to get them to where they are, and trust that God will continue to provide for them.

It's not about being successful; it's about being faithful.

And we pray for it every week: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." Years ago, I found the best definition for the Kingdom of God - in the Beginner's Bible my daughter received when she was baptized. It very simply goes like this:

The Kingdom of God exists wherever love is found.

Because where God's reign is flourishing, His love shines brightly, and becomes more important than anything else. When God's love reigns in our church, we will care for others such that people wonder "why would you do that?"

I believe God's love looks like giving away more than we keep. I believe that God's love looks like caring for orphans and widows and immigrants. This is what the Kingdom of God is like...

The Kingdom of God is like...

33 teens from our church giving the first week of their summer to travel to Providence, RI, to serve the Liberian community in Christ's name. (You'll hear more about this later in the service.) And even more than that are the 4 adults giving up a week of vacation and family time to go as well.

The Kingdom is present, working among us. Without our controlling it or even knowing about it, what we offer, what we plant, is being used by God. We do not make our work bear fruit; the mysterious power of God is responsible for that.

Sure, we rejoice in the good harvest. But it's important to give God the credit, lest we think too much of our own efforts have made this growth.

That is the parable of the kingdom and the lesson of the mustard seed.

Our lives are more than the sum of days lived and dollars earned.

Life has meaning beyond the walls of home or workplace.

It has meaning beyond the walls of self-interest and ego.

We live in relation to God first, then to one another and to the world around us. And in those relationships, in that order, we find the meaning of the kingdom and the worth and value of our lives. And that is infinitely important.

When we make it our aim to share God's love, in the little things especially, when we do that, the Kingdom / God takes care of the rest.

Amen!