

Sermon June 16 2024 - Rev Jo Smith

Why did Jesus speak in parables? Because stories capture our imagination, they stay with us, we can relate to them. Parables reference real life, and that reminds us that the Kingdom is here and now, that God is in all things and with us at all times, even when we can't see Him at work. Even when the seed is buried in the dark and silent earth - God is at work bringing the kingdom to birth. We see Jesus today searching for the right metaphors to illustrate the concept of the kingdom of God.

While this teaching may be familiar for us, it wasn't for those to whom Jesus was teaching and preaching. When Jesus tells parables of the Kingdom, lessons that often begin, "The Kingdom of God is like..." we hear them with 2000 years of Christian tradition that has made us ready to hear them. But to the people of 1st century Israel, their understanding of the Kingdom of God was very different from ours. Before unpacking what Jesus said, it is important to know what the people would have expected.

The Kingdom of God for the people of ancient Israel had a very specific form. As we are reminded each Advent, the Israelites were waiting for the Messiah, the Saviour King who would free them from foreign oppressors like the Egyptians, Babylonians, Persians, and Romans. And this Messiah King would establish an earthly Kingdom with divine approval – a powerful kingdom with powerful armies – maybe even powerful enough to do some oppressing itself. A wealthy kingdom with abundance – maybe with enough abundance that other nations would come begging to it. This Kingdom would keep Israel from ever again being ruled over by foreigners. This Kingdom would find favour with God, and would therefore be a holy and righteous Kingdom. This

Kingdom would be centered in Jerusalem, with the temple, God's dwelling place, as its symbol of power. The Kingdom of God was long hoped for but also had to live up to very specific criteria.

Into this culture of expectation - Jesus showed up. And he started telling parables about the Kingdom of God being like unknown seeds scattered in a field, with the sower having no clue how they would grow. Jesus tells the example of a farmer who has sown a tiny seed; he now watches and waits for it to bear fruit. Whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. Jesus told parables of how the Kingdom of God was like the humble mustard seed, the smallest of seeds that would grow into the most unruly of garden weeds.

These parables would not have described a Kingdom like that which the crowds would have expected. This was not the Kingdom of God they were looking for.

Even though we have heard all the Kingdom parables, we too can have a pretty narrow definition of what the Kingdom of God should look like. We too often want a Kingdom of power, security and predictability. We expect that God will fit into our narrow vision of what the Kingdom should look like

I can't help but think of the small and seemingly negligible start of many ventures and ministries and the extraordinary results that God has produced. Though we may not know how.

This mustard seed image is one Jesus has used before when teaching about faith. (if you have faith as small as a mustard seed) Now he uses it to describe the Kingdom – a mustard seed was a well-known image for

smallness – yet all his listeners knew that from this very small seed a huge shrub could grow – so big that birds could shelter in its branches – and the use of “every kind of bird” resting in its branches was an OT image for all the nations of the world. This image speaks about the transforming but often hidden work of God’s Kingdom. We are not talking about a Kingdom that is like earthly Kingdoms AND it’s not about a remote place somewhere far off in the future, its being built in the here and now, it’s in the every day even though, so much of it we cannot necessarily see in the here and now or the short term, just as we cannot always see the mustard seed growing.

These days, just like those first century followers of Jesus, we too are in a moment of expectation. Reeling from the horrors that we see unfolding in the middle east, distressed by divisions in our own culture, between ideologies, how best to address the gap between the rich and the poor, the housing crisis, inflation, how to best take care of the environment.

And this pushes us to ask for, to demand, to expect something of our leaders, of those in charge. To demand and expect a response from God.

Our hopes for the future, our hopes for the present can look a lot like the hopes and expectations of the crowds listening to Jesus today, wanting some very specific things because of our world in need, because of the cries for justice from the oppressed, grieving, and marginalized.

Yet, today, we know that this parable of Jesus’ is about defying expectations, about doing the unexpected. God is asking us, in the middle of the chaos, to step back and consider just what the Kingdom of God might look like.

So let me ask a question. And it is for the gardeners among us, in particular.

Does anyone know of a seed that looks like the plant it produces?

I can't think of any.

You might never guess what plant a seed turns into until you plant it. In fact, many seeds also look very similar to each other and it can be hard to tell them apart without labels. Planting seeds is a bit of a guessing game. And churches, like all human beings, don't like facing the unknown.

In the best of times, churches often prefer to know that the things they do, the ministries, outreaches, projects or programs that they start will be predictable, identifiable, manageable.

As human beings we want a world that is predictable and safe. We long for a world that isn't blindsiding us every week with another tragedy or another big news story or another thing to get all worked up about.

But the Kingdom of God is simply not that way.

God is up to something that is not safe or predictable or manageable. Scattering seeds is not predictable, or safe. Sometimes God ends up planting mustard seeds in the middle of the field – mustard seeds that grow into wild, weed-like over-powering bushes.

This is what Jesus says the Kingdom of God is like: A sower who scatters seeds, but who isn't sure just what will grow or how it turns from seed into a living plant.

And yet again, this is what Jesus says the Kingdom of God is like: A small unassuming mustard seed, planted in a garden and threatening to take over.

As people of faith, as workers and tenders of God's garden, we declare that the Kingdom of God is near to us. That it is here. But sometimes we imagine that it is *only* here. That the Kingdom is contained only within the *Church*. And then God has other ideas, seizing opportunities to throw us out of our comfort zones, to call us to find new and unexpected ways of being. God demands that we give up our narrow vision of the world, and instead embrace the wide-open, possibility-filled vision that God has for us.

We forget that the Kingdom of God is not contained within our imagination and expectations. The Kingdom of God appears and grows in unexpected places from surprising seeds.

To people who have a very narrow view of what the Kingdom of God looks like, to the Israelites of the 1st Century, and to Christians of the 21st century who often have equally narrow views, Jesus reminds us that the Kingdom of God is so much more than what we know.

Jesus tells of how the Kingdom of God is spread with seed that is scattered all over.

Jesus tells of how the Kingdom is sprouting in un-expected places.

Jesus tells of how the Kingdom of God is growing into life that we would never have predicted from the seed.

Jesus tells of how the Kingdom of God is teeming with life where we would have only imagined barrenness.

And in the scattered seeds of the Kingdom, God is reminding us that there is more work for us to do. God is reminding us that there is a new and unknown way of being the Church and a community of faith ahead for us, even if we don't know what that will look like. Even if the seeds we feel we have to scatter seem so tiny and insignificant.

New plants growing from the most surprising of places.

So as we struggle in this moment to find a world that meets our expectations, that conforms to a controllable, manageable state... we are reminded that God is busy with other plans.

The idea that wonderful things grow out of something very small and simple is not easy for the world to grasp, but it has always been God's way.

Do you know that there are only 12 notes (7 tones and 5 semitones) from which every melody has ever been written? From Amazing Grace and the second movement of Mozart's clarinet concerto, to Beethoven's 9th symphony, to Rock around the Clock and Blue Moon and La Vie en Rose, and Stairway to heaven and Eagle Rock and every amazing and dreadful piece of music in between. Such extraordinary abundance and variety from such limited resources!!

AND

The idea that amazing things can be happening underneath the surface of our world view is not easy for the world to grasp but it has always been God's way. The seed of the Chinese bamboo tree lies invisible under the soil for FIVE years, not dormant but secretly in the darkness

building an extensive root system so that.....when the first shoots appear above ground it takes only six months for it to reach somewhere between 2.5 and 3 metres tall!

Amazing things happen with limited resources. And we never know what God is quietly up to outside of our limited view of the world.

I wonder how often the disciples would have thought back to these parables after Jesus had left them. There they were, a small odd bunch of people, tasked with the seemingly impossible – to bring in the Kingdom of God. We look back 2000 years later and see what that small band of people achieved – a worldwide Christian church, and so much in terms of social justice. But we also see how much more there is to do – so much that we too are in danger of being overwhelmed. It's then, when we feel there is nothing "I" can do in the face of all the suffering and trouble in the world, when we feel discouraged about the life of the local church or diocese – then we need to remember the mustard seed. We live in a time that expects efficiency and immediate results. But a plant or a tree needs time to grow; and human relations cannot be built nor our problems solved overnight. People too need time to grow and change. Fortunately, God is patient with us. And we must become patient with one another and, with God's help, give people and the Church time too.

Just as the farmer planted that mustard seed trusting that it would grow, so we must do what we can to live out God's Kingdom in our own lives – however inadequate it may seem to us – because even small things can have a real impact – particularly on those around us and with whom we meet in our ordinary daily lives.

God is scattering seeds of the Kingdom all over. God is growing plants that we would never have guessed from the seeds. And God's Kingdom is showing up, taking over, filling the fields with life.