

**The Kingdom of God is Like…**

**June 17, 2018**

**Mark 4:26-34**

Grace and peace to you from God Our Father and from the One who reveals God and God’s Kingdom to us, amen.

Today’s Gospel contains two parables for us to consider. Before we take our deep dive into these two gems I think we need to take a step back and learn or maybe relearn exactly what a Parable really is. Some people think a parable is an analogy where “A” equals God, “B” equals the world, or the devil, and “C” equals us. Our job is to figure out these A, B, Cs to make the parable make sense for us. Some Parables might be analogies, but most are not and God’s Word isn’t given in some code language we have to decipher or figure out. It normally means just what it says. Another popular misconception of how people think about parables is they’re stories with a moral meaning. Again, there may be parables that have morals, but that’s not the primary purpose of the parables Jesus told.

If not these things, then what are we supposed to make of these special stories? I tell my confirmation students a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. The actual word itself comes from the combination of two Greek words, *“para,”* like parallel, which means “beside,” and *“ballein,”* which means “to throw.” A parable is literally 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 stark, sometimes subtle, sometimes obvious, sometimes something to mull over. Because they call into question accepted “truths,” they’re almost always a bit subversive, challenging and even goading us to consider other possibilities in light of God’s promises. Eugene Peterson, the author of the popular Bible translation, “The Message” calls parables, “narrative time bombs.” Peterson says they’re meant to undermine our assumptions of the various “givens” or “realities” we accept unquestioningly and offer us a vision of something different.

The second thing I want to remind you all of is the true, Biblical meaning of the term Kingdom of God. I’ve said this many times when the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven comes up in our Gospels, the Greek word translated as Kingdom really means the “Rule” or the “Reign” of God. It makes a huge difference in how we understand these stories when you think about God’s Kingdom in this way. Most people think of heaven as the place where God resides. It’s a land of angels and other heavenly beings. It’s the place where the “good people” go when we die. It’s far away, in the great by and by and we never get to experience it here on earth while we’re still on this side of the grave.

On the other hand, when you understand God’s Kingdom as anyplace where God rules, then you can begin to see God reigning everywhere God’s people gather and everywhere God’s will is done here on earth as it is in heaven. When we see the world as God does and when we act toward each other as God would have us act, we are living in and under God’s rule. That means we can experience and enact the “Kingdom” here and now and on this side of the grave even as we recognize our best efforts fall short of God’s vision. God’s activity and reign is not yet fully present among us, but we ***are*** able to live into and help bring about the reign of God within our own limited sphere of influence.

These two parables in our Gospel text for this morning fall right into that exciting, albeit frustrating “now and not yet” dimension of God’s reign. As seeds grow without our effort, so too will God bring about His reign. It’s not up to us. We can’t make it happen. Nor can we prevent it. God is ultimately responsible for bringing God’s rule and reign to bear. This is sheer promise. It’s Gospel and it’s good news, but I find it also a little discomforting, especially when I realize God’s rule and reign, his concern and activity is on behalf of everyone, even those who look or believe or think differently than we do. We can’t bring God’s reign of redemptive and surprising love and grace, but neither can we control it, moderate it, or domesticate it and we definitely can’t stop it.

It’s really funny how God’s Word is so alive. I’ve read and preached on these parables several times and yet this week God revealed something totally new that I’ve never considered before. I studied the mustard plant a little this week and discovered it’s not much of a shrub. The mustard plant is much more like a weed than it is a shrub. Nobody plants mustard seeds to beautify their landscaping around their homes. Mustard grows just about everywhere even in places where it’s not wanted. If I can be so bold, mustard is more like a weed than it is a shrubbery plant and so is the Church. Jesus says His Church is like the mustard seed that grows like an out of control weed and spreads and can hardly be contained, even if you’re not sure you want it.

When I ponder this parable I find it to be a slightly unsettling promise. Kind of like the petition we so regularly pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.” Do we really want God’s rule and God’s will to be enacted among us? When a loved one is sick or when we’re facing difficulties in life I’m certain the answer is a resounding absolutely yes, bring on God’s will and bring it on right now. What about those times when things are going pretty well for us? Are we as anxious for God’s rule to come among us then. Are we prepared for the possible upheaval in virtually every aspect of our lives? This parable should shake us up a little. Jesus meant it to awaken us to the promise that God is on the move – in our life, in our community, in the world – and that God will in time complete the work God has started.

In the meantime, we’re invited to enact God’s reign wherever we are, acting in the confidence that God’s promises are true. This means when things are going well, we can take delight in being more aligned with God’s will and ways. It also means when life is hard, when we meet resistance, or when we fail or fall far short of our hopes, we can take refuge in the promise that God is still at work and has not given up on us or the world. We can’t measure the strength or validity of God’s promises based on our efforts, but we can allow the promises of the God who created light out of darkness and raised Jesus from the dead to give us confidence to take joy when we see God’s reign lived out and to be encouraged and empowered to keep faith and have hope for a better tomorrow when we don’t.

I’ve heard from many of you that we spend a lot of our time and treasure in outreach ministry, but we’re not experiencing the growth that seems to be promised in parables like these. We get a huge response from the community when we offer things like our Trunk or Treat Fall Festival, but it doesn’t seem to transfer into bringing those folks into the Church or closer to God’s reign. In today’s religious/secular environment, it takes more than offering a fun activity once a year to bring people into the Church or for them to know Jesus Christ like we know him. This past week when this subject was brought up again I asked the question if we’ve taken to heart my challenge from last summer. Have we learned to move from a “Welcoming” Church to an “Inviting” Church? If all we offer is a fun time of fellowship, but fail to invite our friends and neighbors back for Sunday Worship, then it’s on us for failing to close the deal. If we do Trunk or Treat this fall, I suggest we appoint people, maybe from those who have been doing our greeting and hospitality work on Sunday mornings, to just mingle with the crowd and as they talk to the folks ask them to return on Sunday and offer to meet them or even pick them up at their homes and bring them to God’s House.

There’s an old preacher’s adage that goes – “work like it’s all up to you, and pray like it’s all up to God.” This might describe every element of our life of faith. Throw ourselves into the opportunities and challenges ahead of us with equal parts of delight and resolve, keep at it knowing God is with us and for us, and give it our all, knowing no work done in love is ever lost or squandered. God, in time, will draw all things together for good.

May we continue planting seeds everywhere we go. When we see the growth, may we acknowledge God’s reign and bask in God’s rule of love. When we labor and fail to see God’s will being done, may we examine ourselves, our actions and our own motives to ensure we’re aligned with God’s will. If we’re found wanting, may we have the courage to change our actions. If we’re aligned with God’s will and yet fail to see the fruit, may we remain faithful, trusting in God’s timing and God’s plan to reconcile all things for good. May we be blessed and strengthened for our tasks and joyful in our serving. Thanks be to God for allowing us the privilege of planting seeds to help bring about His Reign, advancing God’s Kingdom among us right here and right now, amen.