

“The Church as...the Kingdom of God”

Valley Presbyterian Church – June 14, 2009

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

Rev. John Wahl

Mark 4:1-2, 26-32

Chapter Four of Mark’s gospel is devoted entirely to parables; and, specifically, to parables about farming and agriculture. Some of these stories are told to the large crowds of followers who had come to hear Jesus teach at the seashore; others – like the two that we read this morning – are shared only with the twelve disciples. Each of these stories also share a vision of the Kingdom of God: the new realm that is dawning upon them as they are listening. And so, the members of the audience both observe and participate; as we do today upon the hearing of God’s word. Christians work at transforming the ideal of Christ’s message into a reality: that the Kingdom of God – the promised realm of justice, freedom and love – would emerge among them and through them.

Parables are not just simple stories which are shared to make Jesus’ teaching more easily understood. Instead, Jesus bluntly tells his listeners that many of them would not understand the meaning of the parables; and that even the disciples would need further explanation. Jesus offered these teachings to anyone who wanted to listen, but the truth housed within them was not obvious to everyone.

Parables demand something from their listener. They have a revealing quality which only comes to light when the hearer is searching for a greater understanding. Because there are multiple levels of meaning, finding the truth within the message requires a gradual process of peeling away one layer and then another, working from the obvious and practical to the symbolic and mysterious.

Jesus speaks to his audience using images that they know – like planting seeds and waiting for the harvest – but his listeners will really understand because they have come to know Jesus – the divine made known to them in human form. And so, it is not simply the oldest who best comprehend, or the smartest or the best educated, but the ones who can devote themselves to seeing God in Jesus who understand the divine message that is contained in these brief stories.

Jesus’ use of parables is not surprising because he himself is like a parable of God: a visible and living story comprised of multiple levels of meaning. As the presence of God among them, Jesus spoke of himself to the people as being the lamp, the shepherd, the bread, the water and the light. Therefore, the dawning realm that he announces – the Kingdom of God – is described in natural terms: it’s like a flock, or a field, or a plant. It is like these things because it represents a partnership between the earthly and the divine:

between the natural process of life, growth, death and rebirth and the Creator who provides for, feeds, and sustains earthly life.¹

Jesus speaks to the people in parables, but his listeners must do their part in order to understand them. In the same way, Jesus will offer himself to the people, but they will have to decide whether or not to accept who he is and what he has given. The gift is free for the taking, but like every gift, it must be received in order to be appreciated. As we hear these parables again this morning, let us listen actively, seeking to peel away some of the layers of their meaning, and let us receive them as the gifts of God given for us, the people of God, that we might better know Jesus and more fully understand his message of the kingdom of God which is dawning in our midst.

Read Mark 4:26-29

There are some things in life that we can and should do, but there are other things we instead must embrace and believe that God will bring about regardless of our efforts. As the first of this morning's parables brings to light, the farmer is to be commended not only for the effort which is put forth in planting and reaping, but also for simply watching nature takes its course and patiently waiting for the right time to step in.

And so, the Kingdom of God is like a sleeping gardener. Or perhaps more like a gardener who sleeps through the growing season but wakes up in time for the harvest. While the credit for the growth of the seed into grain may not belong to the gardener, when harvest time comes, the work will begin again.

What does this parable mean for the church? If God takes responsibility for the growth of the fields of grain, do we have any role beyond sleeping through it? Well, of course we do. There are good works to be done. There is more ground to be broken, more seed to be sown. But, "the harvest will come without us having to work for it, because God loves us."² It is normal – maybe even natural – for us to remain busy and anxious, but here Jesus reminds us that we need not create the Kingdom of God: the dawning realm of justice and peace and love; it will be God's gift to us.

In Isaiah 55:10-11, the word of the Lord says this: "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."

¹ *Preaching Through the Christian Year B*, Second Sunday of Ordinary Time.

² Wendy Farley in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 3

The return of God’s word, the dawning of the Kingdom of God, will take place in what we call God’s time: *kairos*, as opposed to our earthly chronological time: *chronos*. Even though we cannot mark this progress in terms of days or months or years, as God’s people, we are called to believe that the transformation that God intends is taking place. As we seek to help bring about the Kingdom of God: the emerging realm of greater hope, peace, and love, we might sometimes become frustrated because the marks of this realm are not obvious to us; they do not seem tangible to us; we don’t see it happening before us in our families, in our church, in our world.

And so, Jesus offers a second parable. The Kingdom of God is also like this, he says, this is how it could be described:

Read Mark 4:30-32

Time and again, the Old Testament writers used great trees, like cedars and oaks, to depict the most powerful kingdoms of the world. And so, for the disciples listening to this parable, who themselves would have known the stories of the Old Testament, “it must have seemed contradictory to hear Jesus use the image of a bush to represent the Kingdom of God.”³ This second parable, about the mustard seed, puts a spotlight on the function of the full-grown plant. The harvest is no longer the point – for it is the plant provides home and shelter for the birds of the air. If the church is like the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of God is like a mustard bush, then the role of the church is to provide shelter, hospitality, and sanctuary. It suggests to the disciples that the secret of the Kingdom of God can be found in their present experience. They do not have to wait until the next life – or for some uncertain, future time of harvest – for their words and deeds to reach their fulfillment. What they do – the seeds that they sow – allows people to live a fruitful and faithful life.

Several years ago, a reporter interviewed former Russian President Boris Yeltsin and asked him what gave him courage during the fall of communism in the USSR. Yeltsin replied that it was an electrician from Poland named Lech Walesa, who bravely opposed communism in his own country. Walesa, when asked by a different reporter, said that he had been inspired by the civil rights movement in the United States and the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Years before, Dr. King said that he had been inspired by the courage of one woman, Rosa Parks – an ordinary seamstress, who had refused to give up her seat and move to the back of the bus.

Maybe it’s not too much of a stretch to say that one ordinary, brave woman living in an ordinary, small, Southern town, inspired the downfall of communism. Because that is the way that seeds – the ones that are planted and then mysteriously nurtured in their

³ *New Interpreters’ Bible Commentary*, vol. 8

growth – so often work.⁴ Even if the planter of the seed were to sleep right through the growing season, Jesus seems to be telling his disciples, that tiny seed – with God’s help – can grow to become something mighty. It may not look mighty in the eyes of the world: like a giant oak or cedar tree; but mighty in the eyes of the divine: more like a mustard plant which provides shade and shelter to the birds of the air.

God’s promise is that what starts out small can become big, not only grand in its scale but also large in its purpose. Even though we may not know exactly when or how, the seeds can be transformed by God into something of amazing fruitfulness. Our job – as it was for the disciples of Jesus’ day – is to keep planting small seeds: by showing kindness and taking risks for others. This is God’s calling for us as the church because we have been called to embody the Kingdom of God within the church. “God does not give the gift of faith to individuals as their private possessions. Rather, the gift provides light for others and shelter for the birds of the field.”⁵

Therefore, for those who have been given the gift of faith – even faith that may seem to us as tiny as the mustard seed – we are to be the planters. We are to be the ones to encourage others to have courage and persevere. We are to be the ones to insist that the world is not ruled by greed or corruption, but is instead ruled by Christ, who sits at the right hand of the Father. We are to be the ones to teach the stories of the faithful to our children and to share the good news of God’s grace to those who have not yet heard. We are to be the church: to offer shelter and shade, sanctuary and sustenance, to all who are in need of it. We are to follow the example of Jesus and proclaim that the Kingdom of God is upon us, and that the word of God is being revealed in our midst. And if we fall asleep for a season, we are to awaken and look for signs that the harvest of the field has become ready.

Jesus invites his hearers – his disciples in every generation – to join him on this journey. “Let everyone who has ears, hear” he says. Let everyone who has ears, hear. AMEN.

⁴ Sharyl Peterson, “Seeds” in *Lectionary Homiletics*, June 2006.

⁵ *NIBC*, vol. 8