

# “Speaking the Word”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – January 19, 2020*

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany      Mark 4:1-9, 26-34      Rev. John Wahl

In the verses that lie between our two readings this morning, the disciples ask Jesus about his use of parables – perhaps wondering why he paints pictures and spins yarns rather than just getting to the point, already. But the reason he gives them is fairly unsettling: he teaches through parables, Jesus says, so that some people will understand what the kingdom of God is like and so that others will not. All will be presented the same words, the same images, but some will not be able to comprehend what they really mean.

Of course, the very idea that there are insiders who get to understand and outsiders who are left with just a riddle is disturbing, in and of itself. But the reality in Mark’s gospel is that everyone – the disciples included – gets confused about who Jesus is and what he is saying at one time or another. Sometimes, Jesus would explain to his disciples what he was teaching to the crowds, but what about those other times, when they were left only with the message that those who have ears to hear should listen? Today, we want to understand as well, but often we are left with questions instead of answers. This can be frustrating, but also instructive: teaching us that there are certain aspects of our lives – the mystery of God’s kingdom included – that might only make sense in parables. We might even go so far as to say that parables are necessary for making sense of life.<sup>1</sup>

So, what are parables? They are comparisons; meant to cast two things alongside one another to provide analogy, contrast or reflection – sometimes like the distorted reflection that appears in a funhouse mirror. A parable says, “this one is like that one,” but it is not always clear how. Rather than giving explanations, parables invite listeners into a creative, imaginative exercise. Sometimes, like parallel lines, the “this” and “that” of parables placed alongside one another might not meet – at least not right now – no matter how hard we try.

Jesus tells parables not for explanation but for exploration, not for certainties about faith – for unlocking all the mysteries of God – but for discoveries about how faith works. One young person describes them as “sorta-like stories,” as in

---

<sup>1</sup> Karoline Lewis, “A Life in Parables”

the zebra he encounters in his new picture book is “sorta-like” the horse in its well-loved predecessor. Almost, but not quite.<sup>2</sup>

In this morning’s first reading, we heard the well-known parable of the sower scattering seed. This is not the kind of farmer that we may know today; one that carefully prepares the soil for planting and systematically measures the seeds and places them in organized rows. No, this is a different kind of planting: tossing seeds here and there, on paths and rocky ground, making them vulnerable to hungry birds and scorching sun. But whatever portion of seed that happens to land on good soil grows abundantly: producing thirty, sixty, or a hundred-fold.

In our attempts to understand this particular parable, we alternately try to put ourselves in different roles. Are we the sower – called to plant seeds in the same way as this farmer, casting them far and wide, regardless of how we judge the quality of the soil? Are we the seed – often placed in settings and situations beyond our choosing or control? Or are we the soil itself – the ones who receive the scattered seed – God’s word – to nourish and help it grow?

But at its core, what Jesus is trying to explain in this parable, and most of the parables that he tells, is what the kingdom of God is like. This kingdom is not about geography or some static state; it is about the dynamic reality of God’s power and presence within creation and in the lives of God’s people. If we really hear Jesus calling to us to follow as his disciples, then, how will his presence among us effect and shape our lives?

In the first of the two short parables in our second reading, we hear that the kingdom is again like scattering seed, but that this seed grows automatically, on its own, even if the farmer doesn’t know how. It might grow so subtly that you wouldn’t even notice; until, at last, it produces its intended fruit. Though our efforts might be misguided, the plant still emerges and – when the time is right – we will be called on to take part in its harvest.

Truth be told, though, we’re usually not comfortable just scattering the seed and waiting for things to grow. We think we need to do something; maybe we need to genetically modify the seed so it grows more easily in different types of soil, so it will produce more, so it is healthier and more resilient. We think we need a gospel that will grow in today’s challenging, changing world; a new kind of hybrid. Maybe we need more prosperity or promise in this gospel, a bit more glitz and glam grafted onto this humble gospel.

---

<sup>2</sup> Sharon Ringe from *WorkingPreacher.com*

But we also think that changing the seed isn't enough. We also need to modify the soil that the seed grows in. So, let's change the worship environment; maybe we can take out the uncomfortable prayers of confession and add in more comfortable seats. We wonder how this gospel is going to grow if we don't break up the unplowed ground of outdated ways.

When it comes to our faith, we're sometimes afraid that we aren't doing enough or aren't doing it well enough. Doing more, though, can sometimes be a sign that you don't trust what you're doing; that we don't trust that the seed will grow; that we don't trust the power of the gospel to grow on its own.

In the second parable, we are told that God's kingdom isn't like any ordinary seed, but that it resembles a mustard seed. Where Jesus lives, mustard was as prolific as a weed; it could pop up just about anywhere and start multiplying; and, once it had taken root, it would spread widely and could not easily be eradicated. So, though it was useful for medicinal and flavoring purposes, the mustard plant was not the kind of crop most people would sow. It was not a cash crop and, when it appeared, good luck keeping out of your garden.<sup>3</sup>

The Kingdom starts out like the smallest seed, a mustard seed. How big do we believe it will get in a time like this; in soil like this? Big enough to meet our budget? Big enough to fill up our sanctuary? Big enough to put a dent in the poverty of morals or finances we see around us? What happens to this smallest of seeds? It grows up, Jesus says, and becomes the greatest of all shrubs.

A shrub, really, a shrub? We want a majestic forest, a fruitful orchard, a plantation of cash crops, or a field of flowers, not shrubs. Not even the greatest of shrubs. But we're told that the mustard plant's greatness is not based on how big or beautiful or useful it is to us, but instead that it offers shelter and shade for the birds. The mustard plant does not rise so high that it might one day topple and fall. It instead remains lowly, not unlike a king who enters a city humble and riding on a donkey; one who comes not to be served but to serve; who stoops down to wash feet. The kingdom of God is great in its humility and lowness. It is big enough for everyone to find a home: Jew and Gentile, male and female, old and young, black and white, rich and poor, gay and straight, introvert and extrovert. "Birds of every feather can flock together because this mustard shrub, this kingdom, this gospel, is big enough."<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Matt Skinner from *WorkingPreacher.com*

<sup>4</sup> Stephen McKinney-Whitaker, "Big Enough" from *Day1.org*

These parables insist that though God is often a mystery to us, God's kingdom will not remain secretive forever; nor does its ultimate coming depend on human ingenuity. The seed grows without us, but the seed still needs to be sown. The mustard plant is not perennial, but an annual: it requires renewed sowing to populate the earth.

So, the good news may simply be that there is still much for us to do. The kingdom of God does not carve out some separate sacred space, it does not seek out only one type of soil; but claims all aspects of our lives. There is no gospel that is economically neutral or dismisses the importance of interpersonal relationships. The church is called to provide hospitality, sanctuary, sustenance and renewal to those who need it, like the birds of the field looking for a place to nest. We must approach this gospel with creativity and imagination, but that it no excuse to fail to act; the news is good news because it is good. Even when we do not fully understand, we can still scatter the seed and trust God to make it grow.

Let anyone with ears to hear, listen! Amen.