

2 CORINTHIANS 5:6-17 (p. 937)

JUNE 13, 2021

MARK 4:26-34 (p. 815)

BLAINE

PASTORAL PRAYER

Awaken us to your Truth Lord. Speak to our hearts. Whisper a Word to us and enable us to respond. Share a message with us today, or a story, or a Parable, one that absolutely rocks our world! And accompany it, please, with the power to boldly proclaim it within that world. We ask these things in Jesus' Name, Amen.

"PLANTING SEEDS"

According to the Church Calendar, we're in "Ordinary Time"! Maybe you noticed? I mean, the Vestments on the Communion Table are Green, right? They are Green a lot, actually! We have a lot of "Ordinary Time" in our lives! Maybe you've noticed that too? We're in-between quite often, in-between the Mountains and the Valleys, in-between the Peaks and the Pitfalls! We live much of our lives on level ground, really! Normal! Common! Ordinary!

The Church Year begins with Advent, with anticipation and preparation. We look intentionally, and expectantly for Messiah to break into our world! That starts on November 28th this year, by the way. It's followed by Christmas, of course. Emmanuel! God with us! The Birth of our Lord! Then comes Epiphany, an "Aha Moment", when we "get it", when "the veil separating Heaven and Earth is momentarily pulled aside"! Where we sense, powerfully, the Presence of Almighty God! It's a Mountaintop Experience, to be sure! Which moves us to Lent, a time of testing, and trials, and temptations! The darkness of the "Valley of the Shadow"!

Lent ends at Holy Week, a week of “ups and downs” all its own! Which culminates on that Glorious Easter Morning, discovering just who Jesus really is! That’s followed by Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, God’s Power and Wisdom given to God’s people, enabling us to Witness to the world! And then, we move into “Ordinary Time”!

And it’s ironic, don’t you think, how often our own Spiritual Journeys echo the Seasons of the Church? Or intentional maybe? We too have Mountaintop moments, right, similar to Christmas, and Easter, and Pentecost! And dark scary times of “Shadow”, that feel like Lent, or Maundy Thursday, or Good Friday! There are times of eye-opening revelation on our journeys! Epiphanies! We experience Pinnacles of Joy, and Depths of Despair! We have times of Enlightenment, and times of Confusion! We go through Seasons, don’t we? But much of “life” happens in-between! You can plant on the Peaks! We often do! And even in the shadowy corners of the Valleys! But most the “growth” happens on the Plain, doesn’t it, in “Ordinary Time”!

Jesus is teaching His Followers. It’s “Planting Season”, “Intellectual Planting Season”! “He spoke to them in Parables,” it says. “As much as they could understand. And when they were alone, He explained everything to them.” I like that! And I see parallels with our lives as well!

By the time we get to the Fourth Chapter of Mark, a lot has taken place, both Peaks and Pitfalls. Jesus has been Baptized. And gone through a time of Trial and Temptation in the Wilderness. He has gathered a few followers around Him, “apprentices” really! Our Lord has driven out more than a few “impure spirits”! There has been some amazing Healings take place, including Peter’s mother-in-law!

Jesus has declared that He is the Lord of Sabbath, been accused of all kinds of things by both His family and the Religious Elite! Currently, some people think He's nuts! But others are choosing to follow Him. At a safe distance for most. But still, they're choosing to follow! And now, in the "in-between", Jesus begins to teach! And He does it with Parables! In fact, Scripture says that "He did not say anything to them without using Parables". He turns to those of us who wish to follow, and says, "The Kingdom of God is like...!"

Now I have to admit, I love Parables! I'm not sure if it's because I am so visual, or just so dense, but they really help me understand! Pastor David, at a Staff meeting on Monday, talked about "hearing" Scripture, not simply "reading" it. And Parables, I think, help us do that! In fact, Jesus begins His Parable of the Sower by saying "Listen"! How many times have we heard that? How many times in the Gospels do we hear the phrase "he who has ears, let him hear"? It's repeated often in Revelation too, where the Risen Christ is addressing the Church! "Listen," says Jesus. "I have something I want to share"!

I love Parables! I do! And I love, that when Jesus is alone with His Disciples, He explains everything! Often like He does with us! "The secret of the Kingdom has been given to you", He says in verse eleven! God has opened up your eyes to the Truth! You have received a Revelation! Most, though, those on the outside looking in, only see these lessons as stories! That has parallels today too! The world, apparently, is somewhat confused about the Kingdom! And therefore, a bit confused about Kingdom Parables!

Parables, by design, are multi-dimensional, layered, so to speak. They can address different situations, at different times—or speak in different ways, to different people, in different contexts! Parables are a unique way of getting at the Truth, aren't they! They often talk “around” a topic, rather than directly to it! Officially, Parables are “simple stories used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson”! Think “analogy or simile in story form”! They are not really a riddle per se, although sometimes they are! And that may be difficult for those who “just want the facts”! Or frustrating even! But the Kingdom of God, like God Himself, is so much bigger than human facts! Which is why we need Jesus to explain!

N. T. Wright, a brilliant theologian, begins his book, *The New Testament and the People of God*, with a caveat that I absolutely adore! He writes, “I know that much of what I am about to say is either wrong, or flawed in some way. The problem is I don't know which parts those are, or I would correct them. So, I'm counting on you to set me straight.” Well, that applies to Preaching too, especially about the Kingdom! So, I'm just going to dive in, if that's okay. Let the Holy Spirit of the Risen Christ explain! And then, you can set me straight!

The Kingdom of God is like...! Emphasis on the word “like”! In other words, the Kingdom of God is not actually a bunch of tenants who work out in a field, or a man who pays workers what he sees fit, or someone who gives different talents to different people! It's not a run-away sheep, or run-away son, or a lost coin! It's not a limited number of workers, or an unrepentant town! It's not a hidden pearl either, or a great big net, nor yeast, or children, or weeds even! The Kingdom is neither soil, nor a mustard seed! “The Kingdom of God is like...”

There are all kinds of Parables in the Gospels. Mark, however, only shares a few. His first is probably his most well-known. We call it the “Parable of the Sower”. Maybe you remember it? It’s really more about soil type, in my opinion, than it is the One who scatters the seed though! There is the hard-packed dirt, if you recall, dirt along the path. And there is rocky ground, shallow earth. There is soil that is infested with weeds and thorns, things that compete for nutrients and attention. But there is also soil that is simply perfect for the seed!

That Parable is clear, right? We need to be good soil, receptive to the Word, open to the Rule of God in our daily lives! That makes sense! The Kingdom of God is the place where God is King, right! It’s the place where God reigns, the place where God is in charge. I mean you can’t have a Kingdom without a King! And God’s Kingdom, we are told today, is like a man who scatters seed on the ground, or who plants it diligently if you prefer. He then goes to sleep, or goes away, or does something else. And that seed then begins to sprout and grow. “All by itself,” Jesus says “the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel”!

And that seed, the seed of the Kingdom—even though it starts out small, like a mustard seed, smaller than the head of a pin—that seed, when planted, begins to grow into something huge! It’s like a bush with many branches, a bush so big that birds can not only nest in it, but also bask in its shade! That’s what the Kingdom of God is like! Have you got it? Are we good? Or should we explore a bit further?

The “Sower” is God, right? And the “seed” is the Word of God, the Gospel, the Good News! And obviously if the soil is not too resistant, or not too shallow for it to grow in, or not too distracted, or depleted by all the “weeds” around it, then that seed will blossom and grow! It’s simple, straight forward, right? Or maybe not!

What if the “Sower”, instead of God, or in addition to God, is actually the Church? What if the “soil” then, is actually our mission field? Maybe part of the lesson here is that there are just going to be places, and people, that simply will not receive the seed, no matter how well we sow it! Let alone allow it to grow once we do! Maybe the Parable is telling us that that’s okay? We can let that worry go! We didn’t make the soil the way that it is! Or maybe, the lesson really is closer to home? Maybe the soil is much more personal, and the point is really to prepare our own heart? You see, it’s multi-layered, isn’t it!

Maybe the seed gets planted within us, inside you and me, both as individuals and collectively as the Church? The planting comes with Bible Study and Prayer, with Worship and Sunday school, through Fellowship and in Service to others. The seed germinates when we share our faith with one another, or even when we disagree on some finer theological point! But when it’s planted, no matter what we do, or don’t do, whether we sleep or whether we rise, the Kingdom of God grows within us, even if we don’t know how!

That would certainly be Good News to those of us who are tempted to reduce our faith to a list of “have tos” or “shoulds,” wouldn’t it? I have to be kind. I should read my Bible. I have to pray. I should be more like Jesus!

It would be Good News to those of us who wonder if our lives have had any kind of impact on others what-so-ever, any influence at all! It would be Good News to those of us who think our world is currently spinning out of control, or for those of us whose personal life actually is! The seed of the Kingdom grows, whether we see it or not! And the power for it to do that, is somehow encapsulated within the seed itself!

Can you imagine what it must have been like when early farmers discovered the power of a seed, say a Zucchini or Tomato? Those seeds are tiny! You could carry over a hundred, maybe a thousand in the palm of your hand! And yet those small seeds can produce enough to feed an entire family! Or in the case of Zucchini, an entire town, or County, certainly all your friends! Imagine holding one of those tiny little seeds between your fingers and suddenly realizing the power within it, a power that enables that seed to accomplish such a great feat!

An expert Botanist could most likely explain what happens bio-chemically as that seed sprouts and grows. And any good farmer could tell you how deep to plant it, and how much water and sunlight is optimal. But no one can explain how that seed knows to send “the roots down” and “the leaves up”, no matter which way you plant it! How does a plant know that it needs to produce more seeds, in order to perpetuate the species? And how come such beautiful, healthy plants sometimes grow in all the wrong places?

I remember when I was young, running to the garden with a package of radish seeds in my hand, in order to help my dad. I tripped on the way and fell head-first onto a great big pile of sand. Those little seeds went everywhere!

They were instantly mixed with millions of grains of sand, the most unfertile soil imaginable! I lost the entire package. Those seeds weren't even buried. They just laid there on top of the ground! But you know, those radish plants grew even better than the ones planted in the garden! How could that be? What does that say about the seeds in our lives? What does it say about the seeds we plant as a Church?

I've heard some so-called "experts" claim the Church is dying! Across denominational lines! I don't know if that's true, but we are certainly under attack! We live in a time of the "Non-Religious", they say! Or worse, in a period where people want to be religious in their own way, as if they were God! We're in trouble, they write! On any given pre-COVID Sunday, the average Worship attendance hovered in the low seventies! That includes all the Mega-Churches too, so there must be a lot of ten or fifteen-member Congregations in order to get that average!

People aren't volunteering, the articles say, let alone contributing financially! More Pastors die or retire each year than graduate from Seminary! More members pass away than ever come through the front door! There are fewer members, fewer baptisms, fewer pledges year-after-year! Statistics say...! Surveys make it clear...! The books state plainly...! The harvest is just not big enough, right! We need to do more, or do something! If we don't have a bumper crop this year, then we are going to have to sell the farm!

We're told that you can't just scatter seed any more. You need to genetically alter it somehow, so that it grows more easily in "this particular" soil, or in all kinds of soil—so that it produces more, so that it's healthier and heartier and more blight resistant!

You need a Gospel that will grow in what we have before us! Create a hybrid! Add a bit more “prosperity” to go with the Gospel to the poor! Sprinkle in more glitz and glamour into this humility thing! We need to change our soil, drastically, otherwise nothing will grow! We need to Worship with more lights and more entertainment, install some neon, crank up the base! Or, we need to get back to Worship with thousand-year-old dirt—the tried and true, traditional liturgies, things that worked in the past! We need to till things up a bit, chop up all the clumps, make sure that the roots grow deep! Or, we need to make sure that the soil is “undisturbed”, pure! But we’ve got to do something, right!

Only that’s not what Jesus says in His parable! That’s not what the Kingdom of God is like! The seed will continue to grow regardless of what we do, or don’t do, whether we go to sleep or rise again, whether we understand how it works, or not! It does need to be scattered though! To be sure! And apparently in different plots of land, and in different soil types, and at different times, in different seasons, and the yield will certainly vary! But collectively, in the Kingdom, there will be a harvest!

And there is an order to it. First the blade, then the stalk springs forth, then next the head. And eventually the full kernel becomes ripe. There is a design to this entire process, isn’t there? And apparently, we have a role in it, right? But there will be a harvest! No matter what! Because, that’s what the Kingdom of God is like!

I feel a sense of urgency in this text, for me to do my part, for us to do our parts! But I also see a sense of freedom; freedom from fear, freedom from trying to make things perfect. That's a place where the enemy tries to trip me up, and often succeeds! I want everything to be perfect, and everyone to be happy! So maybe that part of the Parable was just for me? But I sort of doubt it.

We are the Body of Christ, right? And together, we are Jesus' hands and feet here on earth. To paraphrase Esther 4:14, we are here for "such a time as this"! "For if we remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance" must arise from another place! That's a huge responsibility! But it's Christ's Church, not ours! And our Lord decided long ago that the Gospel will spread to the far corners of the globe! So, as small as it may appear at times, this seed will produce a harvest! The question is, do you want to be part of it? Or, to paraphrase Esther again, would you rather "you and your father's family perish"?

That's Jesus' second Parable today, by the way. The part about being small. The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed! Tiny! Insignificant! Common! Did you know that in many parts of the world, a mustard plant is considered an obnoxious weed? Maybe that is a fitting metaphor for the Church, especially in the eyes of the world right now, an obnoxious weed? It starts out kind of small and tends to get in the way. And when it grows, it blossoms into something quite useful! Mustard plants are "annuals" though. The seed needs to be replanted, again and again. The seed will grow, in spite of what we do! The power is within the seed itself! But in order for it to do so, we need to keep sowing it! No matter what! I wonder if that might be what we needed to "hear" today? And all of God's people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Oh, Holy God, you speak in Parables to confound the proud and the haughty. You surround yourself in mystery, mystery that all the wisdom of the world simply cannot fathom. And yet you open up the hearts of those who come to you as little children. Open up our hearts now. Give us a glimpse of your Kingdom. Teach us your Truth. Enable us to see and to hear. Empower us to humbly share. And encourage us along the way.

Father, help us to yearn for a deeper relationship with you. Cause us to long for your Word, and to be renewed in your Presence. Give us you Lord. And give us the desire for more of you. Quicken our spirits to soar with your Spirit, to live near you. And make us witnesses Lord, to help direct others along the way.

Today Father, we come before you in worship and praise. We lift our hearts in awe, and our voices in song. We bow our heads in prayer, and bend our knees in service. We come, Lord, celebrating our great joys, and sharing them with you. But also unloading our burdens and placing them into your care. So, in that spirit Father, we lift up before you.....

Hold these people close, Lord, and help us to do the same. Heal the troubles of this world. And empower us to be your hands and feet in it. Usher in your Kingdom Lord, right here and now, on earth as it is in Heaven. And make us the Greeters, those who meet people at the door with a smile, and help direct them into your Holy Presence. We ask these things in Jesus' Name, as we pray now together the very prayer that He taught us saying, Our Father...