



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CRISTI CHAPMAN, CURATE
THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, JUNE 17, 2018
EZEKIEL 17:22-24; PSALM 92:2-3, 11-14; 2 CORINTHIANS 5:6-10, 14-17; MARK 4:26-34

LOVE'S PERSISTENT WAY

Mark 4:26-34 [*Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."*

He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.]

Last summer, we decided to rebuild part of our garden. After three years of neglect, mostly due to my travels for seminary, the garden was in need of some love. Part of the renovation plan included planting some mint. But before we did, we had to do a lot of work. First, there were those three years worth of remnants that had to go. Then there was the unruly sage bush that had to be cut back. Finally, there was backyard neighbor we had to deal with. As we were digging holes for the new mint, the neighbor looked over the fence and asked what we were planting.

When we told her about the mint, she looked at us, shook her head, and said, "you better watch out. That will take over your yard." We planted the mint anyway.

The Gospel offers us a couple more tales from the garden to consider. Commonly known as the "seed parables," these puzzles reveal something about the nature of God and of God's kingdom: namely that God is a persistent God and that God's ways inevitably will prevail.

Let's start with the idea of persistence. It's a good bet most of you know the parable of the mustard seed. Great things come in little packages. From even the smallest scraps of matter, incredible things are possible, things like galaxies, this earth, and our own bodies. For generations, the idea of the mustard seed's potential has provided hope, even when all that remains is single, tattered shred of faith that God is still present. The parable of the mustard seed is a story about the power of faith. It is also a story about persistence.

Jesus could have used any number of images to illustrate this point. He could have chosen the lofty cedars of Lebanon, like Ezekiel does. Jesus could have chosen some staple crop his audience would have understood... something like wheat or barley. Instead, Jesus chooses something unexpected, perhaps even ironic, to convince his audience. Jesus uses a weed to describe what the Kingdom of God is like.

Mustard has many interesting qualities in addition to being like the Kingdom of God. Naturopaths use mustard because of its healing powers. Chefs treasure mustard for its taste and the depth it brings to sauces. Gardeners know mustard as a spicy annual but one they must watch with care to prevent sprawl. But not everyone has such a high opinion of the spice. Many agricultural experts classify mustard as a weed. Some even consider it an invasive weed.¹ To these learned folks, mustard is a pest.

It turns out that mustard, when left to its own devices, will spread prolifically. As it spreads, mustard creates dense thickets of scraggly bushes. Eventually, those thickets transform into unique ecosystems capable of supporting a diversity of life. They become places where different kinds of species not only can cooperate but also flourish.

... and that's where things get interesting. What is good for one ecosystem is not necessarily good for others. When the dominant ecosystem is endangered, threats must be contained. Noxious weeds must be dealt with or chaos will ensue. When Jesus describes the Kingdom of God as a weed, he describes something many others insist must be controlled or eradicated to maintain the good of the whole. That's a rather sobering realization.

Now, I'll be honest. I bristle a little at the idea of God's realm as a weed. I'm probably not alone. In my own life, I tend to be more like the anxious gardener found in another parable...the one who tries to be helpful by offering to pull up the weeds so the wheat can flourish. But Jesus knows what he is doing, and he wants to upend carefully crafted ideas about God and God's kingdom by making at least a few of us uncomfortable.

That's why the mustard seed is such a good image. Like the mustard seed, God is tenacious and persistent. Like the mustard plant, the harder people try to control or eradicate God, the more creative God

¹For example, see <https://www.fs.fed.us/r3/resources/health/invasives/yellowForbs/blac>

<kMustard.shtml> and <https://www.cal-ipc.org/plants/profile/brassica-nigra-profile/>.

becomes. In fact, in those situations God not only persists but somehow manages to thrive. Just look at the cross and the empty tomb as evidence. For more proof, remember what happened here on Thursday evening. As we dare to be Jesus's people in the world in Western Washington, it appears the Jesus movement is alive and ready to go. That's what God's persistence looks like in the flesh, and that's how God's kingdom thrives.

There's another part of the story we need to explore. What about this other seed parable and the idea of the inevitability of God's Kingdom?

Only the Gospel of Mark includes the parable of the seed that grows in secret. It rarely is the main subject of sermons, because as one commentator noted, it is so boring. This parable can be summed up in three words: Plant. Water. Wait.

While the parable may be boring, it reveals something critically important about God's kingdom: the loving way of God will prevail. The sovereignty of God always wins and always will. The fate of pharaohs, kings, and emperors stand as a testament to that truth. There is an immense amount of hope knowing what God will find at the end of time will look nothing like this mess we find ourselves in now.

But it's also important to tread carefully. While the idea of God's inevitability might bring comfort, it also can lure us into complacency. Worse, that idea might trick us

into believing God's perfect kingdom is already fully here and that it is our job to broker that kingdom as we see fit. As we all know, the headlines are filled with the horrors that result from those kinds of absurd delusions. God's kingdom is never brought about through mean-spirited, morally reprehensible policies that frighten or harm fellow human beings. Those policies do not reflect image of God. Instead, they reflect the fragile egos of the ones who dreamed them up.

So, what is our role? How are we to faithfully act knowing the way of God, this liberating way of love, will win?

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. offers some help. Dr. King was also concerned the idea of inevitability and the Kingdom of God, particularly as it relates to human perception of time. In his letter from the Birmingham City Jail to fellow clergy, Dr. King cautioned against, "the strangely irrational notion that ... the very flow of time ... will inevitably cure all ills. Actually," he said, "time is neutral. It can be used destructively or constructively... ... human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of people willing to be co-workers with God. ...we must use time creatively, and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do what is right."²

The time is always ripe to do what is right. The time is always ripe to love God and to love every fellow human being. The time is

²Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Letter from Birmingham Jail*, April 16th, 1963, p 11. For an electronic copy of the letter, see:

http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf.

always ripe to stand in solidarity with anyone in this country or who comes to this country seeking a better way of life. ...and yes, the time is always ripe to extend the same hospitality God extends to us to every family that comes to this country seeking safety and sanctuary. Even the Egyptians offered that kind of hospitality to Jesus, Mary, and Joseph so long ago.

Later this week at Saint Mark's, you will have another chance to practice this radical act of love by standing in solidarity with fellow human beings. On Wednesday, Saint Mark's will host a forum on behalf of the 200+ central American refugees who are current being detained in Seattle. On Thursday evening, we will process from this place to

Saint James Cathedral to stand in solidarity with all migrants and asylum seekers around the world.

The time is always ripe to incarnate the love of God made known in Jesus. Manifesting that love to the world feeds the seeds that have been planted deep within us. Manifesting that love is the way those seeds grow and become the Kingdom of God visible here and now. May we have ears to hear and hearts to follow the persistent call of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains us all.

AMEN.



Saint Mark's Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark's Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!