



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, JUNE 13, 2021  
1 SAMUEL 15:34-16:13; PSALM 20; 2 CORINTHIANS 5:6-10,14-17; MARK 4:26-34

## THE REALM OF WEEDS

*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.]*

One of the things I love about the Pacific Northwest weather is that it's easy to be a brilliant gardener. Every spring, we plant something new, trying different vegetables and herbs. Last year it was carrots. This year it's snap peas. We tuck them in among the flowers or wherever there's room and then watch what happens. What we grow doesn't reduce our grocery bill much, but it's really satisfying.

I have learned a lot from gardening. Like, transplanting is always hard on a plant, so I have to wait a full cycle of seasons to see if it will thrive. When aphids attack, often ladybugs are on their way. I don't know how, but they are. If pea shoots don't have a trellis to grow on, they'll use each other for support. It seems nature has its own web of interdependency and sustenance. My role is to get out of the way and pay attention.

Our gospel from Mark today is a little cryptic, so here's some context. It's early in Jesus' ministry and he's traveling around Galilee, teaching and healing people. His followers are growing -- laborers, farmers, people who live day to day under the thumb of Roman occupiers. They are forgettable to the elite and powerful, but Jesus treats them as worthy -- important enough to be healed of life-long disabilities and consequential to the God Jesus proclaims.

When a large crowd presses in on Jesus at Galilee, he gets in a boat and begins to teach about the kingdom of God. Now, from the start of his ministry, Jesus has insisted "the kingdom of God is near," but what that means is elusive. God's kingdom is not a physical place or a nation governed by an all-powerful ruler. It's often translated as the "reign" of God or the "realm" of God, a living reality in opposition to the oppression and suffering under the Roman empire.

For Jesus, peace, justice, and universal solidarity hold authority in the realm of God.<sup>1</sup> People live with and relate to each other in a new way, attending to God's desire for all of creation, including themselves. God's realm is not static, but known through actions like giving,

healing, reconciling, growing. It's not easy to grasp, which is why Jesus speaks about the reign of God in parables -- little stories that break open the truth, but never express it entirely. In Mark's gospel, Jesus offers three parables about the kingdom of God and the life of seeds.

The first parable recalls the farmer who sows seeds pretty much indiscriminately -- on a footpath, dry soil, thorny ground, and rich compost. Most of the seed doesn't take hold, but what does increases wildly and produces so much grain it is hard to even measure. You may know that parable, and how Jesus explains that the rich soil represents people who accept the word of God and bear fruit in their own lives. When we consider it, we often ask ourselves, "What kind of soil am I? Am I bearing fruit?" There is a sense that this parable is about our responsibility for making the realm of God a reality.

But then we hear the other two parables in today's gospel. In the first, a man scatters seed and then wanders off, going about his own life without paying attention to the fields. And, the gospel says, "the earth produces of itself," literally "automatically," growing from small shoot to full head of grain. When the earth and the seed have done all the work to

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<sup>1</sup> Jon Sobrino in Jesus of Galilee, p. 90.

produce a bountiful crop, the man snaps to attention and harvests it.

The kingdom of God is like that.

What? How can God's realm be like a farmer who doesn't do anything to make the crop grow but still gets to harvest it? Isn't a fruitful life all about hard work and striving? Apparently not. It seems there is a powerful force that brings forth growth and goodness that doesn't need human help. I imagine Jesus telling this parable with a smile as he sees the confused looks on the disciples' faces.

The second parable continues. The kingdom of God is like the smallest mustard seed that, when planted, grows up to become the greatest of all shrubs with large branches for birds to safely nest. It's a beautiful image – a tiny, dormant, seed is transformed by the rich earth into something gracious and generative.

The kingdom of God is like that.

But wait. What exactly is mustard plant? In ancient Palestine, it was a wild plant, essentially a weed. And it becomes the "greatest of all shrubs," Jesus says in Mark's gospel. Now I imagine Jesus laughing as the hands go up. That doesn't make sense – wouldn't God's realm be more towering or majestic, like the cedars of Lebanon? At least some kind of a tree,

an evergreen for sure. A shrub is not very dignified.

That may have been the thought of the authors of Matthew and Luke's gospels, because when they retell this parable, the greatest of all shrubs does indeed become a tree. But in Mark's gospel, Jesus is clear. The reign of God is like the greatest of all scraggly, annual weeds.

That's kind of like saying, "God's reality of justice and peace for all people" is like Himalayan blackberries that get cut back in the fall only to return in the spring and grow so big and dense that rabbits make a nest for their babies. Or God's desire for humanity's healing and reconciliation is like a gardener who works hard to dig out invasive horsetail fern only to find its spores generating new plants elsewhere in the garden.

The kingdom of God is like that?

Remember, Jesus and his followers came from peasant stock and would have known the routines of farming – the hard work, poor soil, and unpredictable harvest. Jesus isn't making a mistake here, meaning to equate God's kingdom with something grand but stumbling on a humble weed instead. No, he's asking us to reconsider how we imagine God's realm.

Here's the thing about weeds. They are indomitable. You can pull them out, but the root system, spores, and seeds remain. Some will expand no matter what you -- or the Roman empire -- does. You can't control them and if you give them enough room, they will take over the garden. In fact, underground, your garden belongs to the weed.

The kingdom of God is like that.

John Dominic Crossan writes that "the serenity and security passed by Jesus to his

followers [doesn't come] from knowing hidden mysteries of past or present but from watching nature's rhythms of here and now." When I watch nature's rhythms, I see a powerful web of interdependency and sustenance that incorporates all of creation. It is resilient, bountiful, and beautiful.

What do you see?

The kingdom of God is like that.

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<sup>1</sup>Sanford, Jon. *The Man Who Wrestled with God: Light from the Old Testament on the Psychology of Individuation*; 1974.



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