Pentecost 3 Proper 6

June 13, 2021

Mark 4:26-34

There’s a curious line in our Gospel text today. Mark tells us that Jesus only spoke to the people in parables, but he explained the parables to his disciples in private.

Why would Jesus only speak in parables to the people?

By speaking in stories that are left unexplained to those only with him for a short time, Jesus invites those who hear his words to wrestle with their meaning. And by telling stories that resist being boiled down to only one meaning, only one simple interpretation, Jesus invites us to see how Scripture can mean different things to different people.

We see that ourselves, with the different ways that a passage can speak to us throughout our lives, depending upon our circumstances.

But we see it even more clearly when we study Scripture other people. The Parable of the Prodigal Son offers us an excellent example of that.

While we may be tempted to judge the prodigal son for getting into a bind, those who routinely deal with food shortages would understand that a famine was something beyond the son’s control. Those who live in societies where caring for the poorest among them is highly valued may wonder why nobody shared food with him, judge them for forcing him to try to eat what the pigs ate.

These are not necessarily things we would think of.

That’s the value of parables. They defy simplification. They encourage us to wrestle over them together. They prod us to different ways of thinking about God, thinking about each other, and thinking about the world around us.

Jesus taught this way to push us outside ourselves, challenge our conventional thinking. Because that’s what the kingdom of God is going to do when it is fully realized. Life as we know it will be upended.

We see this in the parable of the mustard seed.

Jesus speaks about the size of the mustard seed and how it grows into something enormous compared to the size of the seed.

We can easily and rightly conclude from this that God can take small things and do wonders with them.

And that gives us hope, because it means that God can take the simple acts we do and bless them, multiplying their effect. This is surely good news for when we feel like there’s so much need in the world, so many problems to be fixed, and we can only do so much.

This interpretation tells us that we have no excuse to not act. God will bless our efforts.

But there’s more than that.

We can easily and rightly conclude from this story that God can take ordinary things, unexpected things, and do wonders with them.

This interpretation invites us to find holiness in common things, to see things that we might ignore as being useful to others and valued by God. It upends the expectations of those whose conceptions of the kingdom of God include equivalents of earthly riches. By comparing the kingdom of God to a humble mustard plant providing food and shelter, Jesus encourages us to ponder how what God values is different from what we value.

But there’s more than that.

We can easily and rightly conclude that God’s kingdom is slowly but surely creeping into the world.

People thought the Messiah would come and make everything better immediately. But, in God’s infinite wisdom, it’s not something that will happen overnight, but gradually. This interpretation challenges us to be patient, to look for the signs of God’s kingdom the way that a farmer looks for signs their crop is growing.

All of these things, and possibly more, are true. But there’s one more thing that we should consider with this parable.

Our modern equivalent to the mustard seed is wild blackberries. For many of us, they are a nuisance.

But those blackberry plants provide refuge and sustenance for the wild creatures who are our neighbors.

Like the mustard plants, wild blackberries pop up where they’re not wanted. And it can seem like they take over a space overnight.

So the temptation is strong to root them out. Prevent them from growing any further. Create conditions that make it hard for them to grow.

And that means that at least a part of what this parable tells us is that there will be those for whom the good news of Christ is *not* welcome.

That there will be those who don’t want to see what Mary sings about: the low lifted up and the powerful brought down from their thrones.

There will be those who seek to root out the invasive mustard plant, to take away the refuge it offers, the sustenance it offers. Those for whom their status and power are so important that they will act in defense of their own interests rather than for the common good. Those for whom wealth and might are more important than mercy and grace and justice.

And indeed we saw that happen, when Jesus was crucified and died.

But there is still more.

Anybody who has tried to get rid of wild blackberries knows:

It’s nearly impossible.

They just keep coming back.

Because the seeds have been planted.

So, too, it is with the kingdom of God. The seeds have been planted. The kingdom is growing, and no human effort will keep the kingdom from coming into the fullness God has planned.

We trust in the promises held within the parable of the mustard seed — walking, as St. Paul says, by faith and not by sight, hoping for what is unseen.

Jesus taught in parables to help us be open to the ways that God is working to upend our human way of thinking. Our journey of faith is meant to help us align our hearts more closely with God’s, and that means challenging some of our assumptions about God and about what a life of faith looks like.

And that means letting go of our complacency, being willing to risk our comfort, so that we can grow into the new creation St. Paul speaks of. So we can become who God created us to be.

May our hearts and minds be open to the ways God is speaking to us, to the possibilities God is leading us to, and the mercy God freely and abundantly offers us.