

New Creations

2 Corinthians 5:6-17, Mark 4:26-34

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I guess I've developed certain affection for the gospel of Mark. In 2006, Tim and I had a one-month study trip to Jerusalem, Israel and Palestine. In spite of my good intentions I didn't get nearly the reading done I wanted to before we left. But I was able to be intentional while over there at making the book of Mark the focus of my morning devotions. It was quite fun. Reading about places we were visiting, and visiting places I was reading about.

And Mark is so active: His favorite word is "immediately." His book is full of action, it's engaging. Jesus went here, he did that, he healed these folks, he met those folks. It's a good grabbing narrative. And in some ways, the book is immediate. It was probably written around 70 AD, just after the destruction of Jerusalem, and probably based on eyewitness accounts. So it has a directness and a sense of the unfolding of the life of Jesus that I find compelling.

But Mark is also the source of quite a number of parables, including the two we heard today. And for me parables are a challenge. They are questions and mysteries. They move and shimmer and change with the hearer. They point toward but they don't define. They're stories or similes. And I like answers. I like completion and clarity. And that, you don't get in parables.

So – let's look a bit at parables in general, and then at the two that were part of today's lectionary reading.

C.H. Dodd, in the book *Parables of the Kingdom*ⁱ says this: "at its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought."

Or as my colleague Catherine Foote puts it, parables are way to point to God. But they're not definitive, because God keeps moving. So then you need another parable – another story- to talk about the way God has moved.

And Jesus does love parables. It's a technique that jumped into history with him, and then was his alone for hundreds of years until Jewish scholars began using them in their engagement with the torah. And clearly he did a masterful job- two millennia later we're still wrestling with their meaning. Robert Capon talks about Jesus using parables "...not to explain things to people's satisfaction but to call attention to the unsatisfactoriness of all their previous explanations and understandings."ⁱⁱ

So in my impatient moments I do think, well Jesus, you had this great chance to explain it all, to make everything clear, to bring all the world into your knowledge and understanding of the nature of God, and you used the time with mysteries or riddles. What's with that?

And yet... what would it be if answers were given to us on a plate? What would it be if we didn't have to do the work? Often we know what's best to do. We know the value of discipline or sleep or recovery. But head knowledge doesn't make it so, and doesn't make it our own. It's not until our whole body is engaged - our soul, our mind, our heart - that we find ways to move out of comfortable patterns or awareness. It's when we're challenged and engaged that we have the potential of seeing or doing something new. It's when we move from the inside out that we're in essence born again, not in a formulaic gates-of-heaven-opening way, but in a way of seeing and understanding and being ... new.

So...parables we've got. Gifts and challenges they are indeed. Morna Hooker in her commentary on Mark's gospel writes "For Mark, the parables of Jesus both reveal and conceal: for those who have ears to hear they convey the good news of the kingdom, to those who refuse to listen their message is obscure. The parables are in some ways similar to crossword clues, making sense to those who are prepared to accept their challenge."ⁱⁱⁱ

So let's explore, and see if we're prepared to accept any of their challenge. But we'll do so gingerly.... it would be pretty arrogant of me to come in and interpret that which Jesus thought was best left to wrestle with.

[Mark 4: 26-29] (Jesus) also 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."

[And] Jesus 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."

So we've got two mysteries of seeds. Of growth and transformation from small and insignificant to things of beauty. It's a short step to seeing our faith in that light...just the tiniest bit and we're on the right track. And with crops, with flowers and plants, there is quite the time of waiting. Barbara Brown Taylor calls it the gift of "agriculture grace," that time between the planning and the harvest. A nice phrase. In many ways the process is out of our hands: we can do some planting, we can do some tending, but it's not about control. It is about letting go and letting God. It's not our task to grow the crops. It is our task to plant and nurture. So the kingdom of God may not be the destination of

completion, but in fact may be the process of moving from seed to sapling to plant and then to harvest. The time of grace. Of hope.

And sometimes the results are surprising or troubling. The mustard plant is not a plant that was cultivated and encouraged. It was a weed. It took over and grew like mad and messed up the neat and orderly. And Jesus seems to make it clear that in doing so it was fulfilling its call, doing its life's work. He slips in the part about the birds making their nests in the mature crop, but that's not the mustard plant. That same phrase was used in Hebrew society to refer to the majestic large cedars of Lebanon. But not to a mustard plant – a mustard weed! How troubling – to have a hero plant being one that's out of control and messy. And what a great reminder. God's kingdom isn't necessarily just neat and tidy, organized and in place. It's wild. It's refreshing. It's made up of all kinds.

So there's some things for me to wrestle with. Me who likes neat and tidy. Who likes bookkeeping with its formulas and rows and balancing. Me who likes to-do lists and policies and processes. I'll wrestle with the kingdom of God as an out-of-control weed.

My colleague Catherine Foote says one of the invitations of the parables is to find your parable within it. So – what calls to you? What resonates with you? But then what troubles or unsettles you? And in there is likely to be found some room for the kingdom of God to break through to you.

So – one more thing about this reading to explore briefly - that was troubling for me. The last verse of today's gospel reading: “[Jesus] did not speak to the [crowds] except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.” Well, that just hit me with insider/outsider stuff. The crowds get the parables but the disciples get the answers. Must be nice to be on the inside track. But Elizabeth Malbon writes, “What does it mean to be an insider? Is it easy? Is it really obvious what you gain when you're an insider? Does being an insider free you from having to ponder the parables of the kingdom of God? Does being an insider free you from having to have ears to hear? Does it tone down the surprising nature of the kingdom?”^{iv} Good questions! No getting off the hook as an insider! I was prompted to check out how Eugene Peterson would put that verse put it his translation, *The Message* ... “Tamara's bible.” Peterson puts that verse this way: “When he was alone with his disciples, he went over everything, sorting out the tangles, untying the knots.”

And that helps. It's not about easy answers. It's not about prepackaged truth. It is about the work that each of us can do to listen for God, to wrestle with meaning, and to figure it out together for our own truth and with the help of those we love. And to listen for the ways that indeed God is Still Speaking to and through us. Maybe Jesus was just modeling what it could mean to be the church: together sorting out tangles and untying knots.

Incidentally, often in the gospel of Mark, he will refer to “the twelve,” meaning what we've come to call the disciples. But in this verse Mark notes that Jesus is not sharing

with “the twelve,” but with “the disciples.”^v The implication is that there were in fact more than the “worthy twelve,” and very likely could have included women, a countercultural and gender-affirming, diversity embracing approach. What a model for us...all that variety. And a reminder of the biblical groundedness of our own invitation: no matter who we are, or where we are on life’s journey, all are welcome here.” Because we’re all insiders. We all have opportunities for growth and transformation, and we all have times also to be the nurtured.

And that’s one of the things I’m most grateful for about St. Paul’s. This is a place that welcomes the questions, that shares the journey. That doesn’t mean you’re on your own; just the opposite. It’s not a “take it or leave it” approach. Rather, it’s an “explore, embrace, challenge and share” approach. We do come together to sort out tangles and untie knots. And while we’re fixing dinners, serving pancakes or lunches, teaching our children or making music or locking the building or creating an outdoor meditation space, or being present and open to each other and all who join us, we do it together in the name of Love.

And as the plant germinates from the seed and becomes new life, so are we also a new creation, thanks to the love of God, freely given and generously shared. For gifts of mystery, of challenge, of presence, and of love: thanks be to God!

Amen.

ⁱ C.H. Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom*

ⁱⁱ Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of the Kingdom*

ⁱⁱⁱ Morna D. Hooker, *Black's New Testament Commentaries*, The Gospel According to Mark, p. 120, A & C Black London 1991

^{iv} Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *Hearing Mark: A Listener's Guide*

^v Bernard Brandon Scott