

Sermon: Pentecost 3

Mr. Evans DeVries

June 14, 2015

Year B

Ezekiel 17:22-24

Psalm 92:1-4, 11-14

2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17

Mark 4:26-34

Today's reading contains two parables: the Growing Seed and the Mustard Seed. The first is found only in Mark's gospel. The Mustard Seed parable is also found in Matthew and Luke's gospels. Even though the Growing Seed is one of the shortest parables, Scott Hoezee, writing on Calvin Seminary's website points out, "it has proven to be surprisingly difficult to interpret." He goes on to say, "Scholars cannot agree what the key element is here: is it the power of the seeds, the inactivity of the farmer, or the mystery of how seeds do what they do." We really are left wondering why this particular parable is so obscure. Today's gospel passage ends with the statement "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." We do know that this is about the kingdom of God, but after that, agreement starts to disappear.

The last time that I was up here, I spoke about secrecy and obscurity. I mentioned that one explanation for the use of parables and swearing His disciples to secrecy might be explained by the idea of 'messianic secrecy'. Although not popular, now, the concept was a way of explaining secrecy as a way to keep Jesus off the radar screens of His day until it was time for Him to be revealed. It allowed him to keep a low profile, as it were. But, in the case of the Growing Seed, there may be another reason for its obscurity. Alyce McKensie, Professor of Preaching and worship at the seminary of Southern Methodist University suggests that this parable was meant to comfort the fledgling church and its leaders at a time of great peril. She says, "Most scholars agree that Mark's gospel was the earliest written of the four. It was probably written around the year 70 CE, shortly after the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem." There is

consensus that Mark wrote at about the time of the first Jewish war from 66 to 70 CE. Around the end of Nero's reign, in the year 68, there was a great deal of persecution of the church and great anxiety about just when God's Kingdom would be revealed. This parable says that even without specific tending, the harvest will come, as if automatically. It also may have provided some restraint to those in the Jewish community who might wish to speed the coming of the Kingdom along by force of arms.

Against the backdrop of obscurity of the first parable, we have the companion parable of the mustard seed. This parable is way overstated to any farmers of that day, or this, for that matter. Sharon Ringe, New Testament Professor at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington DC points out that mustard is an aggressive, invasive weed that takes over fields and chokes out crops. Virtually no one would plant it on purpose. Also, while the seed is small, it is not the smallest of seeds. She points out that the image of a shrub that becomes so "large that birds find shelter under its branches lifts the parable from a garden satire to a vision of the end time. In Ezekiel 17 (our Old Testament reading) God plants a tiny cedar twig on a high mountain of Israel and the twig becomes a large and fruitful tree, under whose branches every kind of bird will find shelter." This happens when the Kingdom is fulfilled and the nations of the world come to Israel's God.

What do I take from these two Kingdom parables? One thing that I take from this is the need to keep on sowing the word, in what ever way we can. Even if we can't be around to tend the seeds we plant, we are assured that they will grow. I have a friend who has his own way of doing that. He's one of those "pay it forward" people. Several times a week, he pays for someone's soft drink or coffee at a convenience store or fast food restaurant. He will buy someone's gas, or have the cashier give someone behind him in line a donut. It's his way of telling people that the world is a pretty good place. He doesn't really know what the "harvest" will be but he believes that it ultimately makes a difference.

A second thing that I take from these parables is the danger of coming to think that we really don't have to do anything; that the Kingdom's coming is automatic and therefore, we will automatically be included. James Boyce, Professor of New Testament and Greek at Luther Seminary in St. Paul MN reminds us that in the Small Catechism, Martin Luther, while discussing the Lord's Prayer, points out that, while "God's Kingdom will come on its own, we ask in this prayer that it also come to us." Our inclusion in the Kingdom isn't necessarily guaranteed.

My final take on today's gospel is illustrated in this story. A person receives a call from a friend. The friend asks if the person is busy that afternoon, and the person responds that the afternoon is free of plans and asks why. The friend asks for some help with a jigsaw puzzle which has become very frustrating. The friend says that even with all the pieces spread out, it still makes no sense. The person asks, "Do you know what it is supposed to be when it is finished?" The friend says that there is a picture of a rooster on the box. When the person arrives at the friend's house, the two go into the dining room where the puzzle is spread out on the table. The person says, "I see your problem. Do you have any coffee?" The friend replies that there is freshly made coffee. The person says, "Good why don't you get us a cup while I put the corn flakes back in the box?"

When Jesus told his often obscure parables, and his disciples didn't understand, He didn't become Donald Trump and say "You're fired!", Instead, he explained what he was saying. While He seemed on occasion, mildly miffed, he was patient. He didn't say, "Man, I have got to get better disciples!"

As we await the coming of the Kingdom and as we pray for our inclusion in the Kingdom, we need to be patient with those around us and with ourselves, as well. After all, we need to remember that we are all struggling to make sense out of the corn flakes of life.