

Mark 4:26-34  
June 17, 2018

26 He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, 27 and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. 28 The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. 29 But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come." 30 He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? 31 It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 32 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." 33 With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; 34 he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Do you know what the very first words Mark has Jesus speaking in his gospel? The two parables we just read give us a hint. In the fifteenth verse of chapter 1, Jesus begins his ministry following his baptism by stating, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:15) For Mark and his gospel, highlighting the fact the kingdom of God has drawn near in Jesus is critical. We recall the people in Jesus' time and in Mark's time were living under the mightiest and most ruthless governing force the world had ever seen – the Romans. And into this reality comes Jesus. Right from the very onset of his ministry sending a message to the all within earshot

that a new kingdom is near. We often miss the directness of Jesus' words to the ruling powers of his day that established a kingdom so drastically different that the kingdom of God Jesus lived out and proclaimed. You see when Jesus says the kingdom of God is near he is not so much talking about a place but rather he is talking about a ruling power – that emanates from God alone. He is talking about whose authority do those he encounters live under. The kings (emperor) or God's. In many ways, Jesus puts the Roman leadership and one could surmise the religious leadership on notice from the very beginning that a new form of kingdom is dawning, and it will look drastically different than what the world knows. It really is no wonder Jesus will ultimately find himself hanging high above on a cross. From day one he was a threat to all in power who wrongly claimed divine sovereignty proclaiming themselves as God and ruled in a way that ran so contrary to the kingdom Jesus revealed.

One can only imagine how the emperors, governors, religious elite and others in power and control heard this message and many of Jesus' parables; which, were a direct threat to their very way of life ruling from the place of fear, domination, and the well-being of some at the expense of another as opposed to Jesus' way of rule done out of love, forgiveness, and ultimately laying down his life for the sake of all people.

One can also imagine why so many flocked to and followed Jesus. The kingdom of God he gave witness to surely must have been a beacon of light that slowly began to shine forth through the darkness of life that was reality for most people. The darkness of oppression, fear, poverty, and even life outside of God due to a host of rules and regulations. The kingdom Jesus proclaimed must have given hope where there was despair. It must have brought new life in the face of death. The promise of freedom to so many who deemed that never possible. Indeed, the kingdom Jesus revealed, proclaimed, and ushered in calls us yet today to survey the landscape of our own context and call into question anyone or any entity whose actions, ethics, and values run counter to the rule and reign of God Jesus inaugurates. It calls us to look at our own lives and yes, the church and our very own congregation as we make decisions and steward the gifts of God entrusted to us. Do they align with the kingdom of God Jesus ushers in?

This kingdom will not and does not look like the kingdom so many expect God's kingdom to look like. Take for instance the second parable Jesus tells about the kingdom of God being compared to a mustard seed, which Jesus says is the smallest seed of all; even though we know that is not factually the case. While I do agree part of meaning of the parable, as so many of us have grown up hearing and know, is the reality God's kingdom can grow from the smallest of seeds into a

bountiful and abundant tree bearing forth much fruit and being a place for all creatures to find shelter, life, and wholeness; perhaps, there is more. Because if that were the only point of Jesus could have used any seed; because, aren't all seeds small to begin with. Yet, he specifically uses the seed of a mustard plant, so this must be important to the story and I suspect it was for those first hearers. In many ways, I suspect it was the punch line, so to speak, of the parable. My research into this parable uncovered the fact mustard plants, while very common in Jesus' day, weren't exactly viewed in a positive light. They weren't exactly the image of a powerful and mighty kingdom. Images such as a mighty cedar used to describe another great ruling force in history – Assyria as found in the book of Ezekiel. Or the towering, tall tree reaching high into the clouds above that was an image for the great Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar who led God's people Israel into exile in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE according to the book of Daniel. These were metaphors used to describe great nations and ruling forces.

But no, Jesus describes God's kingdom in terms of mustard plant that grows to perhaps 10 feet tall at best and was viewed more as a weed than a mighty cedar. This was a stark contrast to the ruling powers of the day and certainly was probably a stark contrast to peoples' expectations of who the Messiah would be and the kingdom he would usher in would look like. So how would this have been

viewed as good news? How do we today hear this as good news and apply it to our own reality? First, I think it reminds us of the fact God's kingdom does indeed look dramatically different than the kingdoms so often portrayed in the world. While at times it seems God's kingdom may not be blossoming forth or the evil forces of the world are seizing control we hear Jesus' words and are reminded that weeds have a way of continuing to grow. For example, several years ago the concrete drive was poured at the parsonage essentially eliminating the growth of anything below the surface from taking root and ever blossoming forth and soaking in the light and warmth of the sun God created. Yet, in time cracks began to appear in that concrete as the earth settled and guess what came forth from those cracks. Yes, weeds. God's kingdom can never be blotted out. It will always find a way to overcome anything that attempts to eliminate the light of love, forgiveness, redemption, grace, equality, justice, peace, and freedom it promises for all people who believe in the promises of God spoken through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Another point of good news is surely the fact that some in Jesus' day and yet in our day feel like weeds at time. As insignificant. Worthless. Ready to be uprooted and destroyed by the Roman government should they get out of line, resist, or fail to acknowledge the emperor as Lord. Yet, Jesus' message says

otherwise. Weeds have value because weeds are created by God and not only have a purpose but in many ways reveal the very image of God's coming kingdom. Has anyone ever thought of themselves as a weed? I think we have all been here at some point in our lives and sadly there are many who find themselves in this position daily. Viewed as less than human. Stereotyped and stripped of their dignity, self-worth, and identity by a bully or racism, sexism, or classism. Yet, Jesus' kingdom says differently. We are a new creation in Christ and even weeds can blossom into abundant and beautiful shrubs.

**Main Point:** God's kingdom looks vastly different than the kingdom so often portrayed in the world.