

## Seeds of the Kingdom

Have you ever seen a mustard plant? If the answer is no, you haven't missed much. Years ago, I took part in a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. My fellow pilgrims were ministers from several denominations. One was a keen photographer. He showed up the first morning after our arrival in Galilee sporting one of those photographer's vests – the kind with lots of pockets secured with Velcro. He was dressed from head to toe in khaki and looked more like a stringer from Time magazine than a minister on a pilgrimage.

When our guide took us to the hillside which tradition holds was the site of the Sermon on the Mount, she pointed to a scraggly shrub and said, "There! Do you see it? That's a mustard plant." My colleague, who had been snapping photos right and left the whole day, looked at that pitiful little bush and sighed. "Well," he said, "I'm not wasting any pixels on that."

I felt sorry for him, to tell the truth. Here he was, on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, eager to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, only to find that the main character in one of Jesus' best-known parables was anything but **"the greatest of all shrubs."**

At least the Gospel writer Mark calls the mustard plant a "shrub." Matthew and Luke are apparently so embarrassed that Jesus would compare the kingdom of God to something so unimpressive that they turned the mustard "shrub" into a mustard "tree." (Look it up sometime. It's a clear case of Matthew and Luke trying to improve on Jesus' initial effort.)

One can hardly blame them. The word *parable* comes from *para* which means "alongside" and *ballo*, which is the word for "throw." Literally, a "parable" is something thrown alongside something else to make a comparison. Jesus loved to talk in parables, throwing down all sorts of stories and images alongside our lives to open our minds to new possibilities, to prod our imaginations, to give us ears to hear and eyes to see what is hidden in plain sight.

Someone said that Jesus told so many parables, he himself became a parable. He laid his very life alongside ours to show us how we could be fully human like him, and, like him, fully open to God's presence.

Like Matthew and Luke, I'd have preferred for Jesus to compare the kingdom of God to a mighty cedar or a giant sequoia or perhaps a heritage oak like the ones that used to grace Park Avenue. But, according to Mark, it's just a mustard plant – a shrub, something not worth the effort of taking off the lens cap to snap a picture for the folks back home.

Of course, Jesus doesn't compare God's dominion to the mustard plant itself, but rather to the mustard seed, which is tiny – **“the smallest of all the seeds on the earth.”** When planted in the soil, that miniscule seed grows into a plant thousands of times larger than itself. If Jesus exaggerated just a little by giving the mature plant **“large branches”** which provide shade on a hot summer day and a place for birds to build their nests, well, we should probably cut him some slack.

In my experience, most Rabbis love hyperbole.

It could even be, as some scholars suggest, that Jesus is making a joke. He is purposely exaggerating the size of a mustard plant in order to drive his point home. *Tiny seed, so small you can hardly see it. Giant shrub that ate Chicago.* The kingdom of God is like that.

People in Jesus' day had high expectations for the kingdom of God, and when Jesus came along behind John the Baptist saying that the kingdom was just around the corner, those expectations rose to a fever pitch.

Some of the people in those crowds that followed Jesus expected the heavens to open at any moment as hordes of angels armed to the teeth descended on Roman occupiers to send them packing. Others had in mind a less angelic uprising that they themselves would accomplish – a guerilla war to make Israel great again.

Thrown alongside those differing visions of what God's rule -- God's dominion -- would look like is Jesus' own parable. A tiny seed. A hidden germination, a gradual growth, invisible to the eye at first, but eventually so obvious that all creatures – including the birds of the air – rejoice at its full arrival.

Jesus' life was itself a parable of that coming kingdom. His words and actions prompted people to look not up, but around, to see the kingdom sprouting in soil long thought barren. He healed the sick, restored lepers to their families and

neighbors, rebuked religious leaders for their hard-hearted hypocrisies, and crossed the boundaries that were thought to keep “God’s people” pure and undefiled.

Mark does not allot the word “miracle” to Jesus’ acts of healing and exorcism. Instead Mark calls them “signs.” When Jesus reaches out to touch a leper – that’s a sign of God’s kingdom on its way. When he welcomes children and blesses them – that’s a sign that God’s welcome includes those who have no power and no voice. When he turns over the tables of the money changers in the temple – that’s a sign, too – a sign that God welcomes the prayers of the people of all the nations.

And when he surrenders his own body to the soldier’s lash and hammer and nails, that, too is a sign – a sign that God’s kingdom will not come about through violence, but through love. The cross is God’s own parable, both mystery and sign. While we cannot fully comprehend it, we can see in it the sprouting of something new – a love that cheats the grave of its victory, a hope that endures all things.

To be a Christian is to live in the “already” and the “not yet” of God’s kingdom. A quick look around tells us right away that God’s rule is not yet arrived in its fullness.

- Over at the Kearney Center, the cots come out at night to accommodate homeless neighbors whose numbers are double what was predicted when the Kearney Center was built.
- Around the corner at the County Commission chambers, elected officials agonize over how to better the lives of children who are victims of poverty, abuse, or neglect.
- Within our own families, loved ones struggle to overcome addictions or to be reconciled to one another.

Clearly, the kingdom has not arrived in its fullness. And yet, there are other signs to notice.

- Every weekday morning, parents arrive at the doors of a church, bringing their children, knowing that those children will be welcomed, cared for, and nurtured. Later in the morning, the doors to the playground fly open, and children of varying race and hue rush out to play together. Their

shouts and laughter float up to heaven like incense, and out into the street, where passersby can see and hear what God's kingdom looks and sounds like.

- A man knocks on the door. He needs a pair of steel-toed shoes. After a long search, he has found a job. All he needs is a pair of safety shoes to begin his climb out of homelessness. He leaves the church on his way to Walmart to buy his shoes, shouting "Thank you, Jesus,"
- A group of men, all them retired academics, climbs into the car for a drive down to the prison in Wakulla County. They have left their academic titles and certificates of distinction behind and are going down to the prison to meet with their incarcerated brothers. They are not leading the discussion group. They're just going along to be part of the conversation. *Mano a mano*. Man to man. Brother to brother. Equally loved by God and sharing one another's joys and burdens.

These, too are signs. These, too are parables of the kingdom. Jesus points to them to remind us that God is working out God's purpose, even in the darkest hours of the night, when arrogance seems to reign in place of God, narcissism trumps reason, and leaders twist the words of holy scripture to justify tearing families apart and putting children into makeshift prisons.

Clearly, the kingdom is not yet. Less clearly, the kingdom is already here. The signs are everywhere, and God is still at work – like a seed planted in the ground, like a tender shoot pushing toward the sky, like a community attempting to be God's holy people, chosen and precious, and striving toward the light.

Beloved, let us together be parables of God's kingdom so that when it comes in fullness – as it will – we will see it for what it is and rejoice in God's saving grace.