

“Seeds of the Kingdom”

“With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it ...”

Among my most vivid memories of kindergarten was the day our teacher gave each of us a Dixie cup filled with dirt. I had used such disposable cups often at home, but I had never seen one with dirt inside, and I wondered why she would give us such a cup. She then passed out seeds to each student and instructed us to put the seed into the dirt; she came around to inspect our cups as she poured a small amount of water into each. We were then instructed to take our cups home, put them in a place where they would get good sunlight, water them regularly, and then watch what would happen. I remember carrying my cup home that afternoon, being careful that I did not spill any dirt out of it; but I still did not understand my teacher’s purpose with this activity. When I got home, I showed the cup to my mother, who seemed to know immediately what to do with it; she put it on the kitchen windowsill and gave it another small amount of water; like my teacher, she also told me that I should watch the cup, because soon something wonderful would happen. As much as I trusted both adults, I still did not understand what could happen with a cup of dirt that would be that exciting.

Every day, I came into the kitchen for breakfast and looked at that Dixie cup on the windowsill. For many days, nothing happened; then one morning, I investigated the cup and discovered that a tall stalk had shot out of the ground. I grabbed it off its place by the window and excitedly showed it to my mother, who responded that “I told you that something exciting would happen!” It was my introduction to the wonder of seeds growing in soil, and that while we have the responsibility to give them sunlight and water that we have nothing to do with how they sprout and develop into full-grown plants that provide beautiful flowers as well as fruits and vegetables that we enjoy throughout the seasons of growth.

For people who make their living in farming as well as for persons who enjoy gardening as a hobby, planting and caring for seeds and young plants is an important task that is performed each spring. Many people spend the winter months looking through seed catalogues and planning their gardens and plantings for the coming year; when the weather gets warmer, they prepare the soil so that what is planted

might be nourished and grow. But there is still something miraculous and exciting about coming outside and seeing young plants sprout from the soil, growth for which even the most experienced farmer or gardener bears no responsibility. As we sing at Thanksgiving when we give thanks for the abundance of the harvest, *“we plow the fields and scatter the good seed on the land, but it is fed and watered by God’s almighty hand.”* (ELW Hymn 681).

In his teaching ministry, Jesus would make use of familiar images from everyday life to share the good news of the Kingdom of God. These stories are known as *parables*, *“a simple story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson, as told by Jesus in the Gospels.”* (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). While parables were used by teachers throughout the Ancient Near East, Jesus makes frequent use of them to illustrate many aspects of the Reign of God that he has come to inaugurate (*“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”* – Mark 1:14-15). Many of these parables are so well-known that they have become a part of everyday conversations; we often refer to someone who comes to the aid of a person in trouble as a “Good Samaritan,” and we also refer to a wayward child as a “prodigal son.” While the characters and circumstances described in Jesus’ parables are fictional, it may be said that *“all of the great themes of Jesus’ preaching are struck in the parables.”* (Madeleine Boucher).

In today’s Gospel lesson from Mark, we hear two of Jesus’ parables about seeds, expounded on that lesson many of us learned as children. Jesus once again introduces each parable in the context of the Kingdom of God; the first parable centers on a person who sows seeds on the ground, building on the familiar Parable of the Sower in which the seed that is scattered falls on different kinds of soil, most of which are inhospitable to growth, but one of which is “good soil” that allows the seeds to produce in abundance, *“growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold”* (4:8). As in that earlier parable, the Sower of the seed is not responsible for the subsequent growth of the seed; it grows and produces “of itself,” while the one who sowed the seed *“would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how”* (4:27). The description of the growth of the seed into a plant calls attention to the mysterious growth of the seed and to the astonishing fertility of the earth: *“The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain of the head”* (4:28). Likewise, the Kingdom of God grows in a hidden, mysterious way, independent of human effort; *“growth is spoken of as the miraculous work of God and harvest as an outcome that is both gift and miracle.”* (Lamar Williamson, Jr.). As soon as the ripe grain appears, the Sower comes to harvest the crop: *“at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”* (4:29). The image of a sickle used for the harvest recalls the

prophecy of Joel to *“put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the wine press is full. The vats overflow, for their wickedness is great”* (Joel 3:13). The words of the prophet refer to the Day of the Lord and the last judgment; *“harvest time is when the abundant effects of the preaching and hearing of the Word will at last be revealed”* (Williamson).

The second seed parable continues the imagery of small, insignificant seeds being transformed into mature plants. Jesus begins this parable with a question: *“With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable can we use for it?”* (4:30). This parable centers on the miniscule mustard seed that yields a great plant: *“it is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs”* (4:31-32a). The parable highlights the function of the full-grown plant; the mustard bush *“puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade”* (4:32b). As bushes go, the mustard bush is the greatest; yet it is smaller than trees that are often used as symbols of the greatness of God’s Kingdom:

- “Thus says the Lord God: I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out. I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs; I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel, I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind. All the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD. I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the LORD have spoken; I will accomplish it.” – Ezekiel 17:22-24.

The image of the kingdom of God as a bush rather than a tree corresponds to the picture of the Kingdom of God in Mark, which is presented as a mystery whose realization comes as a surprise, a reality whose weakness is its power. Jesus may have told this parable to counter the impression that God’s rule had to appear among the great and powerful:

- “Mark subverts our expectation by comparing the tiniest of seeds with ‘the greatest of all vegetables’ ... The kingdom of God does not operate in accordance with received opinion and the violence of the world’s principalities. At every point it upsets conventional wisdom, turns, and defies it again.” – C. Clifford Black.

Mark concludes this section on seed parables with a general summary that combines the suggestion that parables are intended to aid understanding with the division

between the crowd and the disciples: *“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”* (4:33-34). Jesus’ parabolic teaching is characteristic of his announcement of the advent, nature, and promise of the kingdom of God. Parables reveal the kingdom of God, but reveal it in a mystery:

- “The teaching of Jesus invites us to see and to hear God in the familiar rounds of daily life and in familiar texts like this one ... to sit still and contemplate quietly until the commonplace wakes our minds and hearts to wonder.” – Williamson.

Jesus’ interpretation of his parable of the Sower to his disciples served to remind his followers that parables are a summons to hear the Word of God and to follow Jesus. Those who hear and do not understand remain outside of the circle of disciples: *“they may indeed look, but not perceive; and may indeed listen, but not understand, so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.”* (4:12). Being a disciple of Jesus involves three steps: hearing, accepting the Word, and bearing fruit.

Many years ago, a popular book proclaimed that “everything I need to know I learned in kindergarten.” While there were many lessons I learned in subsequent years of schooling and experience, that lesson my kindergarten teacher taught us at Stony Brook School remains an important learning not only in my understanding of the growth of seeds but in my role as a disciple of Jesus Christ. It was my responsibility to be a good steward of the Dixie cup that my teacher entrusted to me; if I had lost it on my way home or not put it in the sunlight and given it sufficient water it would not have produced the sprout that matured into a full-grown plant. But it also reminded me that I had nothing to do with that plant that sprouted out of the soil; only God can make a seed produce a plant to grow and become a blessing to us. Jesus’ parables teach us that we bear that same responsibility that Jesus entrusted to his first disciples: to be the ones to sow the seeds of God’s Word to all people. As many of the Sower’s seeds failed to find good soil, many of our efforts will not end in what we may define as success; but our task is merely to sow the seeds of the Word of God, since only God can make a seed grow and mature into faith that will be a blessing to all. Paul makes use of this teaching in his understanding of his call and the call of the Church to be the ones who sow the seeds while recognizing that it is God alone who can give the growth:

- “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but only God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a

common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labour of each. For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building." – 1 Corinthians 3:5-9.

The church of Jesus Christ in every age is called to continue to task our Lord entrusted to his first apostles: to sow the seeds of the Word of God to all people, so that all who believe may be blessed with the fruits of God's Love and may bear fruit before others. As it is the Lord who provides the growth, so will that growth often come as a surprise to us. As Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a mustard bush rather than a mighty cedar tree, so will the Kingdom of God often appear to us in surprising and unexpected ways. Because Jesus' words can be translated that the tiny mustard seed grows to become the "*greatest of all vegetables*," it may come as a surprise that "*God's kingdom is like the smallest seed that grows up to become the greatest of – zucchini!*" (Black). But as God spoke to the people of Israel through Isaiah, we are also cautioned to remember that "*my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*" (Isaiah 55:8-9). As our sovereign Lord, God does not necessarily conform to human expectations, nor is God bound to fulfill human demands that God conform with our desires. God proved this in the way the Messiah came to live among God's people; instead of sending a warrior-king to fulfill human expectations of the Messiah, God chose that the one who would fulfill God's promise of the Saviour of all people would be born in a lowly manger and live among God's people as a human being: "*When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children*" (Galatians 4:4-5). Because the Messiah of God did not conform to the Messiah of human expectations, many rejected Jesus as the one who would be the means through which all who believed in him would receive eternal life:

- "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God." – John 1:11-13.

The memory of the Dixie cup our kindergarten teacher entrusted to us serves as a reminder to me of the responsibility that has been entrusted to me to care for the gift of God's Word that I have been called to share with others. As I mark another anniversary of my ordination, I still endeavor to care for and share the blessings of God's Word in my work as a minister of Word and Sacrament, one who is called to spread the seed of the blessings of God with others. But while this is a solemn trust

that I take very seriously, I also recognize that I have no control over whether that seed will find good soil, nor do I control what will sprout and grow out of that soil. As the apostolic church, we continue to task entrusted to Paul and Apollos to plant and water while we entrust the growth to the Lord who makes all things possible, so that we who continue to work in the fields of God's mission may lift our voices in one chorus as we celebrate the good news that *"all good gifts around us are sent from heaven above; we thank you Lord, we thank you Lord, for all your love."*

Amen.