

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, January 14, 2024

Friends, I invite you to join me in the spirit of prayer. Let us pray.

Gracious and loving God, we hold fast to your promises to be with us when we gather, to move in our hearts and minds, to indeed silence any voice but your own, that hearing we may feel your call in new ways in our lives and calling us out into the world. Amen.

Our scripture this morning comes, as Pastor David shared with the children, from the fourth chapter of the Gospel of Mark. Now listed in the bulletin it is a long chapter. It is almost the whole chapter, but this morning I will be reading selections from Mark 4, in particular the first 12 verses and then picking up again with verse 21 through verse 34. I invite us to hear these words from the early church.

Again Jesus began to teach beside the lake. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the lake and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the lake on the land. Jesus began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.' And he said, 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'

When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, 'To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that "they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven."' '

Verse 21–

Jesus said to them, 'Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand? For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!' And he said to them, 'Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you. For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.'

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.'

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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.'

With many such parables Jesus 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.

Friends, these are the words of Our Lord. Thanks be to God.

This fourth chapter of the Gospel of Mark finds us with, as we have shared already today, three Parables with thematic connections, and then, of course, some discourse about Jesus's use of Parables. If you were paying close attention, you may have noticed that Jesus's audience shifts during our text. In the beginning Jesus is standing in a boat speaking to people gathered all over the side of the lake, and then he shifts to speaking only to those very close to him, to his disciples and those right near him. You see in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus makes these public declarations and then very private explanations. It's something that is unique to the Gospel of Mark, and it is called the Messianic secret. You'll see it as we get further and further throughout our journey in the Gospel of Mark in the Narrative Lectionary, but the tiny bit I want to share with you today is that throughout this gospel Jesus says and does marvelous and miraculous things to point to the power of his words and the fact that he is the Son of God; and he does these things in public. He heals people and he teaches and he preaches, and yet, immediately, as soon as someone says "You are the Son of God," Jesus shift gears and it's like he's over here, going—"look at me doing all these wonderful things," and then immediately when somebody names them, he hops and he says, "Sh, don't tell anybody. This is our—yes, you're right—but this is our little secret. It's not a secret for everybody. This is our little secret here." Because throughout the Gospel of Mark Jesus is attempting to keep the knowledge of who he is and the power that he brings as close to him as he can. That's why we see in this chapter Jesus making broad public explanation, broad public speeches, and then saying to the disciples "I'm telling you this in secret," so that those people don't understand. Primarily, that's not the way we imagine Jesus, not the cultural understanding we have of the Good Shepherd; and yet it is true, in particular, for the Gospel of Mark that Jesus keeps his identity very close by. Now Jesus uses stories throughout all four gospels, actually stories like these parables, with very accessible imagery paired within more complex and opaque framing. The idea of such parables is to open people's imagination to new ways of thinking. You give them something they understand and can grasp and then turn it on its head. So in our scripture today Jesus is attempting to help people shift the way that they see themselves, the way that they see God, and the way that they see other people. Of our three parables today, the parable of the sower and the parable of the mustard seed appear in all three synoptic gospels. They are in Matthew and Mark and Luke. However, the middle parable, the parable of the growing seed, is a parable that's only found in the gospel of Mark in our scripture. Now, as I said before I read scripture, this is a very long passage for the Narrative Lectionary to have chosen, and why the Narrative Lectionary combined them all into one Sunday rather than separating the

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parables out into three separate Sundays for us to consider— they are connected with this theme of seeds and farming, but the metaphors are mixed throughout the parables. Are we the seed, are we the sower, are we the soil, are we the ground? Like it's hard to kind of keep them together, truthfully, but the Narrative Lectionary chose to present them this way, because we can understand their connection as Jesus is proclaiming news about the kingdom of God. These parables are indeed connected by this seed imagery, by their focus on God's kingdom, and their focus on God's grace. In all three parables when we look closely, God is the actor, God is the one who controls the growth of the seed and the timing. Now in the Parable of the Mustard Seed, the mustard seed, which is not actually the smallest of all the seeds of the Earth, but we'll give Jesus this exaggeration for the point of emphasis, but this mustard seed, which is small, under the watchful eye of God, it multiplies exponentially in size. It may not be the greatest of all shrubs, but it is considerably bigger than its start. God brings something beyond the size of the seed out of it.

In our middle parable the farmer sleeps, the farmer sows the seeds, and then sleeps and wakes up and sleeps and wakes up, and the seeds sprout. That's not the work of the farmer and even the sower. In our first parable the sewer scatters the seeds haphazardly according to Jesus. That's not a very effective agricultural perspective, just throwing the seed wherever they land; but even some of those seeds reach their potential through no fault of the sower. This framing is helpful for us because it reminds us where the power and authority lie in the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is not ours to bring to fruition or ours to control. It is entirely beyond us. Truthfully the kingdom of God is at work lots of times despite us. We're the ones sleeping and throwing seed around willy-nilly, but the kingdom is nurtured and always growing in God's hands. Now that's a positive message for me, at least, in our capitalistic and materialistic sort of rat race world. It's telling us that all of our rushing, all of our planning, all of our anxiety, all of our frantic busyness is not what signifies the kingdom of God. Neither the results that we see from all our busyness or the results that we do not see signify what God is actually at work doing, because God is always at work in ways we can't fathom or don't like or fail to see. God is always at work in these parables. Now, even though the kingdom is not ours to control or in flesh, these stories tell us that the kingdom requires something from us. The parable of the sower, in particular, talks about the rocky soil and the thorns and the path and the good soil. Now any gardener or farmer or someone who can keep houseplants alive— please don't look at me, I can't do that—but they will tell you that good soil doesn't just happen. Good soil is not just a matter of luck. Good soil is cultivated, it's nurtured, it's prepared, and it is tended to. Rocks are removed, pH levels checked, the appropriate amount of water given, clumps broken apart; and if we, friends, are to be good soil for the seeds of God's kingdom, we have to cultivate ourselves. We have to care for ourselves spiritually, physically, and emotionally to receive the seeds of God's Kingdom. So we gather here for worship, we read scripture, we pray, we run, we cook, we meditate, we serve one another, we hold one another accountable, we craft, we deconstruct, we remove stumbling blocks for ourselves and for others—we do so many countless things to cultivate ourselves for God's word. There are so many different ways of doing that, because we are each unique children of God, cherished children of God's covenant. I cannot tell you, I will not stand here and tell you that there are these four things that we all need to do to be good soil

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for God, because for each one of us it is so drastically different. And yet, we know that we do need to create that fruitful space, cultivate that space to be prepared to be receptive to what God is planting in all of us. It is also not something that happens once. It's not a thing where we can say, "Ha, I have attended this meditative retreat with Kate Bowler, and now I will be good soil for the rest of my life." Cultivating ourselves is a lifetime worth of prep. It's a lifetime worth of work to continually be listening for God, and sometimes we're going to get it wrong. We are not going to be the perfect soil all the time. Sometimes we will be the rocks that the seed of God is scattered on; sometimes we will be the thorns that choke it out; and there's freedom, friends, in knowing that it's not up to us to be perfect all the time, because God is still at work.

Now the parables in this fourth chapter of Mark also remind us that not only is God's kingdom outside of our control, it also is about more than just us. Jesus tells us that the sower in the parable of the sower doesn't just put seed in the good soil, doesn't just place the seed in those most opportune locations for producing grain, not the most practical or the most likely places. Those seeds are given freely to us and to everyone by the grace of God. The mustard seed of the kingdom flourishes in God's time to provide shade and shelter for the birds of the air, as the text says. It's not just about the soil or the seed but for something that is built and developed for the whole world. So these parables help remind us that the kingdom is for everyone, and it is beyond our control, and that the kingdom asks something from us.

And, frankly, sometimes those things make us a little uncomfortable. In truth many of the parables that we read, that we hear Jesus say, parables throughout the gospels, if we're paying close attention, should make us a little bit uncomfortable, because it really is hard to hear Jesus when we're being honest. It's hard to break out of our cultural norms and our own expectations and the baggage we each carry about what should be, to let those things go and hear Jesus speak about God's kingdom. Now that's why Jesus told these stories on this boat and that's why we tell the stories again and again and again, because we need to hear them. We need to be reminded. We struggle with the mystery of the kingdom of God. It is not something we can see, not something we can control. It is here and not here, in us and around us, and yet our eyes can look and see that it's not here fully, just like the seeds Jesus talks about in these parables. There's a reason Jesus talks so much about the seeds because they are here, and yet they are not there in fullness yet. We know and trust that they are in the ground, but we do not see them sprouting yet.

Even now, friends, we wrestle with the questions of what that may mean. We are wrestling, I think just like the disciples, with when is the harvest going to come. If we hope for these things in God, when do we see their fruition? What can we do? Is there some way that we can cause growth of our numbers, that we can share this vision of what God is doing and bring it about faster, because as humans one of the most frustrating things, I think, that we have to wrestle with is waiting. We don't like knowing that we are powerless. We don't like feeling powerless. We don't like waiting on anything. We want it now, and we want it fast. And yet, maybe for us who meet here to hear the words of the Gospel, there is a glimmer of hope in spite of our cultural complexities, a glimmer of hope that the power of these visions of God's kingdom allows us to let go just a little bit, to labor alongside God and to try not to hold it as tight as we would like.

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One of the things that characterized Jesus's ministry was his ability to see beyond the surface, beyond the appearance, to the possibility. Our scripture is full of stories about Jesus viewing other people not in terms of what the world said they were or what they looked like but in terms of what they could become as the result of the liberating power of God's love. Thus an ordinary fisherman becomes the rock on which the church is built. Thus a dishonest tax collector becomes a trusted friend and disciple of Jesus. Thus in Jesus's presence the unclean are restored to fellowship, the hopelessly ill made well again, and the outsiders and the outcasts are invited to be leaders of the movement of God. When we see these things in Jesus and we hear Jesus tell us these stories about the kingdom, we can acknowledge that living toward the kingdom of God calls us to see beyond what is to the possibility of what might be. It allows us to let the vision of what could be God's vision of the world shape and Inspire what we do right now. Knowing that all of it—the beginning, the middle, and the end is God's work, not our work. Friends, our challenge is to wait knowing that we can do nothing but nurture the seeds of the kingdom and trust that God is alongside at work inside of us and in the world. We cannot confuse the kingdom with our ordinary way of functioning, so we keep showing up. We keep showing kindness; we keep taking risks for God and for others, counting on the fact that the seed springs up and grows, and the farmer knows not how, trusting that God is always at work.

May it be so this day and all days.
Amen.