

THE KINGDOM OF GOD
 (or, “Did You Ever Think of
 Yourself as a Mustard Seed?”)
 Mark 4:26-34 (NRSV)
 June 14, 20069– Ordinary Time 11
 Oakland Avenue PCUSA
 James T. Richardson

MARK 4:26-34 (NRSV):

- 26 Jesus 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 Jesus 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.

Today’s passage of scripture and today’s sermon are about THE KINGDOM OF GOD. By the title itself, you know two things which are very Presbyterian in

theology:

- (1) There is a God.
- (2) God is sovereign.
 God is king.
 God is in charge of everything!

Those are two of the most basic beliefs of the Presbyterian Church.

- (1) There is a God.
- (2) God is sovereign.

by the words “like” or “as.”

For instance: “*A smile broke over his face like
the sunrise over a lake.*”

Or, “*God is like a good father.*”

In today’s passage, we find Jesus using two **similes** in talking about the kingdom of God.

And, I might add, parenthetically, that these kingdom parables,
these teachings of Jesus,
these two similes

are intended for believers,

for followers of Jesus,

for those who acknowledge that (1) there is a God, and

(2) God is sovereign,

God is king,

God is in charge of everything.

In these two parables in today’s passage, we are involved with **God-talk**
and with **kingdom-talk**.

THE FIRST SIMILE

The first simile says that **GOD is going to do it.**

Listen to the way that Today’s English Version tells it:

The Kingdom of God is like this. A man scatters seed in his field. He sleeps at night, is up and about during the day, and all the while the seeds are sprouting and growing. Yet he does not know how it happens. The soil itself makes the plants grow and bear fruit: first the tender stalk appears, then the head, and finally the head full of grain. When the grain is ripe, the man starts cutting it with his sickle, because harvest time has come.

(Mark 4:26-29; TEV)

The first simile says that **GOD is going to do it.**

God is going to bring in the kingdom.

45 years later, I still remember one of my seminary professors talking about preaching on *the parables of Jesus*, and he told our class: “**You cannot make a parable walk on all four legs.**”

By that the professor meant that usually a parable has a major point, and you do damage to the major teaching if you try to take the parable apart and analyze it piece-by-piece.

So, we do not want to try to make this parable about the Kingdom of God “walk on all four legs!”

However, let me venture in that direction by assuming that “**the man**” in the parable is a **believer** such as you and I are. With that assumption, the teaching is clear that **God is going to bring in the kingdom.**

It is not dependent upon what you and I do!

Now, it is true that you and I are the sowers of seed and the gatherers of the harvest, just as the church is the preacher of the word as well as the receiver of new church members.

But the main thrust of the parable is that **GOD is going to bring in the Kingdom!**

If you agree, I have two points for your further consideration on this.

(1) **The first point** is the input that some Biblical scholars hold that Jesus used this parable to tell the Zealots that his understanding of his role as the Messiah was NOT the same as their understanding of the role of the Messiah. The Zealots were those Jews who felt that the Messiah was going to overthrow the Roman Empire by an armed revolution and force the Kingdom of God into existence. Jesus was saying to the Zealots in this parable that he was not that kind of Messiah. The bringing-in of the Kingdom of God is solely the work of the Holy Spirit of God!

(2) **A second point** comes from watching “Christian Television,” much of which in my opinion gives a poor presentation of what the Good News is all about. One preacher I watched was what I would call “*a soul-counter.*” He was the kind of Christian who counts the number of souls he thinks he has won to Christ much like the native American Indian in the old picture show westerns who use to carry scalps on his belt to indicate the number of cowboys he had killed.

In this parable today, Jesus is saying that the work of growing grain and saving people is NOT the work of the farmer or the preacher; it is the work of the Holy Spirit.

The role of the believer is to be the sower of seed and the gatherer of the harvest, just as the church is the preacher of the word as well as the receiver of new church members. **GOD is going to bring in the kingdom;**

it is not dependent upon what you and I do!

That is the first parable and the first simile in today's passage of scripture.

THE SECOND SIMILE

There is a second parable and a second simile which says that

GOD is going to do it in a grand or gigantic way.

Listen to the way that the Today's English Version tells it:

“What shall we say the Kingdom of God is like?” asked Jesus. “What parable shall we use to explain it? It is like this. A man takes a mustard seed, the smallest seed in the world, and plants it in the ground. After a while it grows up and becomes the biggest of all plants. It puts out such large branches that the birds come and make their nests in its shade.” (Mark 4:30-32; TEV)

This second simile on the Kingdom of God says that

God is going to bring in the Kingdom in a grand and gigantic way.

JOACHIM JEREMIAS was one of the great Biblical scholars of the 20th century, having been born in 1900 in Germany. I was introduced to his books while I was a student at Columbia Theological Seminary, one of which I used in preparing this sermon. The book is entitled Rediscovering the Parables, and it was published in 1966,

In commenting on this parable of the mustard seed, Jeremias says that **the tree which results from the mustard seed and shelters the birds is a common simile for a mighty kingdom that protects its vassals, its servants.** Listen how he puts it:

“Thus we are shown the mustard seed, as big as a pin’s head, about the smallest thing one can see, ‘the smallest of all the seeds on earth’ (Mark 4:31)---every word emphasizes its smallness---and when it is grown, it is ‘the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade’ (v. 32)---every word brings out the size of the shrub, which by the Lake of Gennesaret, reaches a height of about eight to ten feet.”
 (Jeremias, Joachim, Rediscovering the Parables,
 New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1966, p. 117)

So, what in the world is the meaning of the parable of the mustard seed and its relationship to the Kingdom of God? Joachim Jeremias says that it is this:

**“Out of the most insignificant beginnings,
 which are a mere nothing to the human eye,
 God creates his mighty Kingdom,
 which will embrace all of the peoples of the world.”**
 [Ibid, p. 118]

Did YOU ever think of yourself as a mustard seed?

**Did you ever think that even the smallest things that you can do
 can influence people and the world around you?**

HAVE YOU EVER: given someone a hug,
 written a note of thanks,
 visited a person who is a shut-in,
 given a good book to someone to read,
 sent a charitable gift to a good cause,
 delivered a casserole to a neighbor,
 said a prayer for another person?

**Did you ever think that even the smallest things that you can do
 can influence people and the world around you?**

I hope that you will forgive me for using a personal experience, but as you might guess, it is the only kind that I have ever had! One day when I worked in Clemson, I received a wonderful letter in the mail. It began:

“Twenty-two years ago I went to Clemson as a scared, intimidated summer intern with no idea of what a minister was supposed to do. Thanks to you I not only learned what good ministers do, but how they act and what they say.”

Now married and the mother of two teenage daughters, the Rev. Mrs. Leeann Rogers Scarbrough is the Pastor of the First PCUSA of Talladega, Alabama, and she serves on her presbytery’s Committee on Preparation for Ministry which oversees folks who are preparing to become a Minister.. While Fort Hill Church may have forgotten Leeann Rogers, what a thrill it is to know that Fort Hill Church touched her life in such a significant way! And that is exactly true of Oakland Avenue Church as well!

Did you ever think that even the smallest things that you can do can influence people and the world around you?

Let me read you a story which is told by the great New Testament commentator William Barclay, for years a teacher and pastor of the Church of Scotland.

Once a new church was being built. One of the great features of it was to be a stained-glass window. The committee in charge searched for a subject for the window and finally decided to take as its subject the lines of the hymn,

**“Around the throne of God in heaven
Thousands of children stand.”**

They employed a great artist to paint the picture from which the window would be made. The artist began the work and fell in love with the task. Finally he finished the picture. he went to bed and fell asleep but in the night he seemed to hear a noise in his studio; it seemed to him that he went into the studio to investigate; and there he seemed to see a stranger with a brush and a palette in his hands working at his picture.

“Stop!” he cried. “You’ll ruin my picture.”

“I think,” said the stranger, “that you have ruined it already.”

“How is that?” asked the artist.

“Well,” said the stranger, “you have many colours on your palette but you have used only one for the faces of the children. Who told you that in heaven there were only children whose faces were white?”

“No one,” said the artist. “I just thought of it that way.”

“Look!” said the stranger. “I will make some of their faces yellow, and some brown, and some black, and some red, for they are all there in heaven, for they have all answered my call.”

“Your call?” said the artist. “Who are you?”

The stranger smiled. "Once long ago," he said, "I said, 'Let the children come to me and do not stop them, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven'---and I am still saying it."

And then the artist knew that it was the Master Himself, and as he knew it, He vanished from his sight. The picture looked so much more wonderful now with the little black Africans, the little yellow Chinese, and with the red for the Indians and the Arabs burnt with the sun and the sand, and with the little white children, too.

In the morning, the artist awoke and rushed through to his studio. His picture was just the same as he had left it; and he knew that it had all been a vision and a dream.

Although that very day the committee was coming to examine the picture, he seized his brushes and his paints, and began to paint the children of every colour and of every race throughout all the world. And when the committee arrived, they thought the picture very beautiful and one whispered gently, "Why! It's God's family at home."

(Then Dr. Barclay comments:)

The Church is the family of God; and that Church which began in Palestine, small as the mustard seed, has room in it for every nation in the world. There are no barriers in the Church of God. Man made the barriers and God in Christ tore them down.

(Barclay, William, The Gospel of Mark,
Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1956, pp.109-110)

SO, WHAT IN THE WORLD DO YOU THINK
THAT THIS SAYS TO OAKLAND AVENUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH?