

“The Kingdom of God Is Like...” a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey
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TEXT: Mark 4:26- He 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.’ He 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 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.

THIS CHURCH does not like the word Kingdom. We think it is too male and too hierarchical. So we look for alternatives – it’s part of that language challenge I talked about last week. If not “Kingdom,” how do we talk about this “world according to God”? Usually I take the “g” out and say kin-dom – a world where we all live as kin, in harmony, under a rule of Love under our One God.

Sometimes we say Reign, or Realm, pointing more to the act of living together rather than a finite ruler. Heather always says Community – “Thy community come on earth as it is in heaven.” One commentator calls it the Culture of God – that is actually a very interesting concept. Go home and look it up – how might we be invited into the culture of God: the set of attitudes, values, goals, and practices of everyday existence shared by people in a place or time and passed on to the next generation.

It is interesting to play with language. But I worry that we spend too much effort rejecting the word Kingdom and not enough effort wondering what Jesus actually meant by the word “Kingdom.”

Fortunately for me, Jesus had the same worry. For him, it wasn’t that his listeners rejected the word Kingdom, it was that they had a very different idea of what the word meant.

The Jewish understanding included a conquering Messiah, who comes to restore the nation of Israel to the land. For the Israelites living under Roman occupation, the tension was between everyday reality and a mythical vision of Israel as God’s chosen people. The cultural symbol for this myth was the great cedar of Lebanon. Cedars of Lebanon were comparable to the huge redwood trees of California. They grew straight up for two or three hundred feet or more. Every kind of bird could enjoy their shade. The Kingdom of God as a nation would be the greatest of all nations just as the great cedar of Lebanon was the greatest of all trees.

Jesus had a different understanding, a different definition. And as resistant as you are to the word Kingdom, the people of his day were even more resistant to a new definition.

So, as the text says, “Jesus did not speak to them except in parables” Jesus used stories about ordinary day-to-day real lives to uncover new and radical truths. He offered a common place vignette with a reversal or a surprise that confounded expectations and caused the listener to think, to wrestle, to enter the situation and find a new reality. With stories, he undermined expectations and invited transformations. He buried a universal truth in a particular circumstance.

One might say that being exposed to a parable creates a kind of crisis of faith. Crises cause pain and anxiety, but after the initial trauma and before the return to balance, there is enormous possibility for the positive re-orienting of one’s life. It is a time for re-examining priorities, changing behaviors and goals. A parable can turn reality on its head in ways that allow for both re-evaluation and reassurance.

Consider the first story. The Kingdom, the rule of God, the way God wants life to be, is like a sower who does not know how the seed grows, until suddenly it is ripe for harvest. What, you protest? No fertilizing, no tilling, no watering, no weeding? Is this a prosperity Gospel, don’t do anything and riches will come? The first century Palestinian farmer would know this was not about doing the work. Of course a farmer works the field. Instead, this field that produces when you are not looking would be a revolutionary idea for people living in a Roman-occupied state. For them, wealth was becoming more and more concentrated in landholders – or bankers or CEO’s or hedge fund managers-- who enjoyed the benefits of farmers – or factory workers or teachers or computer techs -- hard work. The peasants in Jesus’ world ended up with but a small portion of the grain they harvested.

This farming story says that God is at work in a situation that seems untenable. In spite of all appearances that the political-economic rule of the Romans – or the Americans or the EU or China -- will continue indefinitely, the kingdom of God, with its view of God’s abundance and peace and justice, is in the ground. While we can’t see it, don’t understand it, don’t make it happen, we do the next right thing, we do what we can, and then God accomplishes more than we can ever imagine. It is a parable of supreme reassurance. We can count on this reassurance today every bit as much as the ancients could.

Now, the parable of the mustard seed is a bit more complex: the Kingdom of God is like the smallest of all seeds, which to become the largest of plants with such long branches that the birds of the sky can find shade. We have made a sort of Christian cliché out of this, thinking that God will take even our small works, our tiny grains of faith, and make great things happen. But the Hebrew listeners would know this was an absurdity. An alert hearer would have been tipped off by the detail about the garden. In the Jewish view of the world, order was identified with holiness, and disorder with uncleanness. Hence, there were very strict rabbinical rules about what could be planted in a household

garden. A mustard plant was forbidden because it was fast spreading and would invade the veggies. Something is amiss in this vision of the Kingdom!

The rest of the parable would become even more perplexing. Steeped in their cultural images of the great cedar of Lebanon, the hearers would be expecting the mustard seed, Jesus' symbol of the kingdom, to grow into a mighty apocalyptic tree. Jesus' point is exactly the opposite. It just becomes a bush. According to Jesus, a world in the care of God is like a mustard seed, a noxious undesirable plant which someone illegally planted in his garden. It becomes a shrub and a few birds nested in its modest branches. That's all.

This was a hard lesson even for the Gospel writers to hear. So hard was it for people of Jesus' time to get over their idea of the kingdom of God as a triumphant institution that even the evangelists tried to modify it into something more palpable. The parable was meant to change our ideas about how to live on the earth, but what happened was that the old mindset began to interpret the parable in a way that was consistent with its former expectations. There are four versions of the parable of the mustard seed in the Gospels, one each in Mathew, Mark and Luke. There's also one in the Gospel of Thomas. For Luke and Matthew, contrary to all botanical good sense, the mustard seed turns into a tree. In Mark, it turns into the greatest of shrubs. In Thomas, it turns into a great branch so that a lot of birds can rest in its shade. All of these expectations are contrary to the facts. A mustard seed does not become a tree or even a great of shrubs, but that image is closer to the old expectations of grandeur and vindication. Even the Gospel writers watered down the radical thrust and the incredible freedom to which the parable called them.

To say the Kingdom is like a cedar of Lebanon, everyone would yawn, say, "yeah, yeah, everybody knows that ." But if we say, 'It's like a mustard seed...' a weed we are not even allowed to plant in the garden because it is so invasive, well, that gets us thinking. The parable subverts all grandiose kingdom ideas, and invites us in.

If the kingdom of God is like a big weed we can't get rid of no matter what we do, then God is right here, common and ordinary. God's greatest works are not done in cathedrals, big buildings, or large mausoleums. The kingdom is in everyday life with its ups and downs, and above all, in its ordinary insignificance. Such as where most people actually live our lives.

The Kingdom of God is within you, said Jesus. It is among you. It is what you do and how you live. And it is up to us to claim it and live it. If we allow the seed to grow, it will surely bring harvest, a harvest might interrupt our lives in ways that change the landscape of our world. The kingdom of God is like a big weed that grows by the side of the road and which we pass every day without seeing it. It is often in our way. We call it invasive when what it really is *prolific*, , vital, and so easily grown that you have to actively intervene to prevent it from spreading. We are already there; it is already among us.

You may not want to use the word Kingdom. That is okay, as long as you struggle to understand what is really meant by that word. Jesus did not mean an overthrow of the government by an outside force. He did not mean an imposed fiefdom. Instead, Jesus meant an invitation. He offered and still offers new possibilities in living. He asks you, asks us, each of us, to sign on, to volunteer, to respond to the call. We might call Jesus King not because we have to, but because we want to, because we are compelled to, because it is our great pleasure and honor to. No mandatory commands--we are invited to give our love and our loyalty to Jesus, thereby changing our lives and ultimately changing the world.

Thy Kingdom come. The Kingdom of God is up to you. Will you sign on?

CHARGE

Sounds like God is asking us to get up out of our chairs
and get ourselves moving in the world,
popping up like dandelions
through cracks in the asphalt,
growing like clover in empty lots,
spreading like crabgrass in the bleak and abandoned city,
following this strange, confusing seed-sower
who got lynched for his trouble.

Following this Jesus means
expecting new and amazing events to develop
from tiny inauspicious beginnings.
Believing in this Spirit means that God plants little seeds,
and while we are not looking,
the whole thing can get away from us and become
more than anything we could ever ask or imagine!
The One who plants us,
the One who calls us to grow like crazy,
the One who makes all things new,
that One apparently has some big plans in mind for us!

Go find out