

Bringing Forth the Kingdom¹

For the children:

Have you ever been to the zoo? (*I'm sure they have.*)
What was your favorite thing to see?

There were some blind people who went to the zoo once. What do you think they saw? (*Nothing! They were blind!*)

The story goes that they each were given access to one animal.² The first one felt around and decided it was very much like a tree. The second one disagreed. She thought it was like a hose. The third one thought they must have all visited a different animal because he thought it was more like a huge fan.

Do you know what it was they visited? It was an elephant!

The first blind man felt the elephant's legs, so he thought it was like a tree. The blind woman felt it's trunk and thought it was like a hose. The other blind man felt the wind created by the elephant's large ears!

Sometimes we don't know everything there is to know about something. And sometimes it sounds like our friends are wrong because they know something we don't know. And sometimes we're both right, we just can't see and understand the whole thing.

That's when it's important to listen carefully.

In our scripture today, Jesus tells us to listen carefully so we can hear what God is saying to us. We have to pay attention if we want to understand how to live in God's Kingdom.

Let's pray:

God: Open our ears. Help us to listen. Teach us to pay attention .. to you and to each other .. so we can understand all we can know about your love. Amen.

Jesus began to teach beside the lake again. Such a large crowd gathered that he climbed into a boat there on the lake. He sat in the boat while the whole crowd was nearby on the shore. He said many things to them in parables. While teaching them, he said, "Listen to this! A farmer went out to scatter seed. As he was scattering seed, some fell on the path; and the birds came and ate it. Other seed fell on rocky ground where the soil was shallow. They sprouted immediately because the soil wasn't deep. When the sun came up, it scorched the plants; and they dried up because they had no roots. Other seed fell among thorny plants. The thorny plants grew and choked the seeds, and they produced nothing. Other seed fell into good soil and bore fruit. Upon growing and increasing, the seed produced in one case a yield of thirty to one, in another case a yield of sixty to one, and in another case a yield of one hundred to one." He said, "Whoever has ears to listen should pay attention!"

Jesus said to them, "Does anyone bring in a lamp in order to put it under a basket or a bed? Shouldn't it be placed on a lampstand? Everything hidden will be revealed, and everything secret will come out into the open. Whoever has ears to

¹ The sermon title is taken directly from the hymn, "You Are Salt for the Earth" (*Voices Together*, # 297). The refrain says, "Bring forth the kingdom of mercy, bring forth the kingdom of peace. Bring forth the kingdom of justice, bring forth the city of God."

² This is clearly a reframing of an old Hindu parable that I have adapted for the children.

listen should pay attention!" He said to them, "Listen carefully! God will evaluate you with the same standard you use to evaluate others. Indeed, you will receive even more. Those who have will receive more, but as for those who don't have, even what they don't have will be taken away from them." Then Jesus said, "This is what God's kingdom is like. It's as though someone scatters seed on the ground, then sleeps and wakes night and day. The seed sprouts and grows, but the farmer doesn't know how. The earth produces crops all by itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full head of grain. Whenever the crop is ready, the farmer goes out to cut the grain because it's harvesttime." He continued, "What's a good image for God's kingdom? What parable can I use to explain it? Consider a mustard seed. When scattered on the ground, it's the smallest of all the seeds on the earth; but when it's planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all vegetable plants. It produces such large branches that the birds in the sky are able to nest in its shade."

With many such parables he continued to give them the word, as much as they were able to hear. He spoke to them only in parables, then explained everything to his disciples when he was alone with them.

Mk 4:1-9, 21-34 (C.E.B.)

For the adults:

I have a small plastic ball in my hand.

When I was in seminary, we had a professor who taught preaching classes. He warned us that some preachers prefer to take a baseball and tear it apart. They might cut the laces and peel back the leather cover to show the strings inside, strings wrapped around a center ball. Some might prefer to cut the ball in half and show us what it looks like inside.

Neither ball can be put back together again. Which is sad, he said, because most congregations would rather catch the ball (*I will toss the ball into the congregation*). Which do you think is more fun? Catching a ball or learning how a ball is made?

It reminds me of what is probably my favorite poem. "Introduction to Poetry" by Billy Collins.³

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

³ Billy Collins, *Sailing Alone Around the Room* (Random House, 2001), p. 16

By the way, the mathematical description of the arc that ball followed when I threw it is a parabola, which has the same root word as that of a parable. Too many preachers, my seminary professor might argue, want to tie a parable to a chair and beat it with a hose until a meaning comes out. Not enough preachers want to let the congregation enjoy the arc of the parabola. In fact, there is a compelling argument that the gospel writers are the first to do so when they present Jesus explaining what various parables mean.⁴

The problem Jesus faces is trying to help us experience the Kingdom of God. But there are no words to capture it fully. So he invites us to figure it out with parables and stories about God's Kingdom. He uses lots of parables, in fact. We can recall several by simply referring to a key aspect. Think of the Prodigal Son, for example (Lk. 15:11 ff). Or the Parable of the Talents (Mt. 25:14 ff). The parable of the Mustard Seed and the parable of the Sower, which we heard earlier today, are other examples we remember easily (Mk. 4:3, 31).

And I think it's reasonable to believe there were other parables Jesus told that are not recorded in the gospels.

Of the ones we have, we quickly realize that no one parable tells the full story. None is complete in its comparison; yet each has a significant thing to say about how to bring forth God's Kingdom.

It's also important to remember that the parables are not about farming or business practices. They are about the Kingdom of God. Perhaps it serves as a reminder to not make the Bible into something it isn't. It isn't a book about horticulture or biology or science. It isn't even about history. The Bible is about God's love for us, about God's desire to bring forth a new kind of kingdom, in all its glory.

I happen to believe God's Kingdom is not a place as much as it is an attitude, an event that happens, an environment in which we grow into the new creation. And I believe the church is called to bring forth the Kingdom by living in a new way. As the Apostle Paul says "If anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!" (2 Cor. 5:17, C.E.B.).

Jesus resorts to parables to describe this new Kingdom because our language is so limited. There is no way to accurately describe God, no matter how hard we try. If we could, we would have a severely limited God. For the same reason, we cannot expect to describe God's Realm. Jesus instead tries to help us understand it with pictures and stories that focus on one aspect or another of God's Kingdom.

Two parables about seeds in our scripture today, for example, help us see and appreciate the mysterious way the Kingdom grows (Mk. 4:3, 26). It grows imperceptibly at times, and yet it grows. It grows God's way and in God's timing. But it is also more than that.

There may be other metaphors for the Kingdom of God that are more appropriate for you than a seed.

Maybe the cicadas that are waiting to emerge with the next brood speak better to you. Or perhaps the mathematical miracle of compounding interest.

Or think of how children grow. Everyday there is growth and change. Sometimes it's too little to perceive, but I know that every school year my children needed new clothes. I couldn't always see it, but year by year they changed from one size to another.

When I was growing up, our family moved quite often. In fact, I lived longer in five different parsonages as a pastor than in any house we lived in while I was a child. My only understanding of "home" as most people understand it, was when my parents referred to Wisconsin. All my first cousins live within 100

⁴ Geddert, p. 98

miles of where my parents grew up, in Barron County, Wisconsin. It was a place we visited, a place I had never lived; but it was a place we always called home.

And every time we went “home,” every time we visited family, people would comment about how much I had grown since the last time they had seen me. I never saw the change, but they did. And as I grew up, my parents began to relate to me differently. You don’t speak to a teenager the same way that you do to a toddler – at least not very effectively – even if it is the same child.

Children grow over time, not all at once. Just like compounding interest. And so does God’s Kingdom.

No wonder Jesus looks at a seed and suggests it gives us clues about the nature of this Kingdom. As I said, it’s why Jesus uses parables. They help us identify and understand the Kingdom of God in our own lives.

But sometimes we need to toss the parables around a bit and see what else we can discern. The parable of the Sower is a good example. We often tell it as if it’s about the soil that the seeds fall into. In fact, that’s how the Gospel writers say Jesus explains it (Mk. 4:10-20).

But what if it’s really about the Sower? I mean, really, what kind of farmer throws seeds on the road and into the weeds? It’s one who is intentionally generous. Or perhaps zealously sharing the story of the good news, even when it is being rejected.

Maybe it’s like the story of the pastor who was new to a congregation. He preached a good sermon on that first Sunday and people were pleased with the candidate the search committee found.

The next Sunday he preached the same sermon. The congregation was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, recognizing he had just moved and probably didn’t have much time to prepare. It was a good sermon, after all.

But then he preached it again on the third week and people began to wonder what was going on. When he preached the same sermon again for the fourth time, he was confronted about it. That’s when he said, “As soon as you start doing what I said to do in the first sermon, I’ll move on to my next one.”

Maybe the story of the Sower is like the parents who continue to give unconditional love to a child who seems to reject them. Maybe the parable of the Sower is about continuing to love, even when it feels like it’s being thrown back.

What would it mean if we played with that aspect of the story?

Or what if we assume the story is about the seed itself rather than the Sower or the soil? The fact that other parables refer to seeds might suggest that is a better way to hear it. What if we’re being invited to grow wherever we are planted? What if the Kingdom of God is like a seed planted inside us and we are the soil?

How can we bring forth the Kingdom?

In his commentary on Mark, Timothy Geddert suggests that Jesus uses parables to help the disciples understand the Kingdom of God; Mark, he says, reports them the way he does so we can understand it as well.⁵ But that requires us to play with the stories some, to listen carefully to what Jesus is saying, hearing what God has to say to us today, and paying attention to how that story is lived out in our lives.

⁵ Geddert, p. 91

Before I was born, Hannah Hurnard wrote the allegorical tale, *Hind's Feet on High Places*.⁶ Have any of you read it? In the story, she tells the tale of a young shepherd named "Much-Afraid" who wants to become like the Great Shepherd. Early in the story, a seed is planted within Much-Afraid's heart that eventually grows to the point that her heart is reshaped and redefined; with a new heart, the young shepherd is also given a new name, "Grace and Glory."

I first read that story 40 years ago, and perhaps it's why I began to think of the Kingdom of God as something that happens to and happens within our hearts, growing and changing us over time. Like the seeds in the parables, God's Kingdom grows and becomes something much larger than the seed itself.

It is God's Reign growing within, among, and through us.

You've probably heard about the gardener who had a beautiful garden. Everything was neat, there were no weeds to be found, and every plant seemed to add to the overall beauty. One day a man came by as the gardener was tending her garden. The man commented about how wonderful God is that he could make such a beautiful garden, to which the gardener responded, "yeah, but you should have seen it before I started helping."

God relies on us to bring forth the Kingdom.

As I said earlier, the parables Jesus tells are not about farming or gardening. They are about the seed, the seed that miraculously grows, the seed that becomes something much larger than when it was planted.

And I don't want to get into the trap of trying to tie a parable to a chair and beating it with a hose to get the meaning out of it. I want to join with you as partners in bringing forth God's Kingdom here on earth, beginning here in this place.

The church, at its best, is a model of what the Kingdom is or can be. We bear the seeds Jesus sows. We also sow the seeds and watch them grow. And then we get to witness of the miracle of growth and fruitfulness.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Benediction/Summary:

The Kingdom of God remains a mystery because none of us here have fully experienced it. Like seeds ready for planting, we cannot know where or when we will be planted, nor can we fully understand what we will be like after we begin living in God's Kingdom.

At the same time, God's Kingdom is happening all around us. It is mysterious, it is powerful, and it's wonderful. But it's not our kingdom, it's God's. God alone decides how, where, and when the Kingdom is revealed. Our task is to find appropriate ways to respond to it – in our church, in our world, and in our hearts.

Go – and grow – in the grace of God. Amen.

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⁶ Written in 1955, I read it around 1980.

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