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SEED PARABLES OF GOD'S KINGDOM
Mark 4:26-34; Proper 6B; Pentecost 4B; June 15-16, 2024

Jesus told parables about the kingdom of God. Before looking at the today's two parables, I think it would be helpful to consider what Jesus means by the kingdom of God.

That this kingdom is "of God" tells us whose kingdom it is: God's kingdom. When Jesus came proclaiming this kingdom, it was as God's Son and God Himself. This is in contrast to many other rulers in this world exercising authority.

Jesus described the devil as a strong man with goods in his house. The Bible describes Satan as the prince or ruler of this world. We heard last week how Jesus came to bind the strong man and plunder his goods, or in terms of kingdoms, to overthrow the devil's rule and establish His own ruling in this world. When Jesus teaches about the kingdom of God, He is describing how God breaks into this sinful and dying world to overcome all our enemies and rule forever as the rightful King. All of creation already belongs to God, but it is corrupted by sin and death, and the devil has claimed it as his own. Jesus came to take us from the realm of Satan to Himself.

The term "kingdom" can bring to mind a country or territory, a place. I find it helpful to think of God's kingdom in terms of Jesus ruling or reigning as King. Where sin has ruled, Jesus comes to rule by the forgiveness of sins. Where death has ruled, Jesus comes to bring life. Jesus' coming in His "kingdom" is a reestablishment of His rule over everything that is fallen under the power of sin, death, and devil, and setting it free to live forever under His gracious rule.

So, when we hear Jesus' teaching about the "kingdom of God," He is telling us how God breaks into our human existence to free us from all that oppresses us so we can "live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness." When Jesus comes in His kingdom, His goal is that we believe in Him as our King and welcome His reign among us now and forever.

With that as a general introduction to what Jesus' kingdom refers to, let's look at today's two parables. Both are agricultural and use the illustration of someone planting seeds. Neither of these parables comes with an explanation, but they build upon an earlier parable, the parable of the Seed Sown on the various soils – path, rocky, thorny, and good – which Jesus did explain. That “seed” is the parable is the preached Word of God in Jesus Christ, which establishes His rule by faith in Him.

In both parables today, the seed is also the gospel Word of God in Jesus, which we hear spoken and preached. It is the Word we hear, see and feel as it is connected to the water of Holy Baptism and to the bread and wine of Holy Communion. This shows the importance of hearing, receiving, and believing this Word in our lives. This is no ordinary word, but the very Word of God that is planted to create faith in Jesus, grow, and reach maturity for eternal life. By this Word, God establishes among us His gracious and saving ruling in His kingdom. This means that we should listen to the Word of the kingdom differently than we listen to other words.

If you were lost in the desert, dying of thirst and exposure, and someone told you the one place to find water and the only way out so you wouldn't die, how closely would you pay attention to that word? Keep in mind that this is a matter of life or death for you. There are many ways that lead to death, but only one that leads to life. I'm sure that you would listen very closely to that word. That is how we should always listen to God's Word in Christ.

The first parable today is unique to Mark's Gospel; it is not found in Matthew, Luke, or John. It describes how a farmer scatters seed on the ground. It does what its' supposed to. It sprouts, grows, and leads to a harvest, even if he doesn't know how it works.

[Jesus] said, “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”

This seed represents God's Word of Christ reign among us. This makes the main point of the parable easy to grasp. God's Word works. The prophet Isaiah makes the same point.

**“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall My word be that goes out from My mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it”** (55:10-11).

The first parable today teaches us that God's Word works. The Holy Spirit works through the Word to create and sustain faith in Jesus. When the **“harvest”** comes, the Day Jesus will gather in His crops, believers will be raised to live in glorious bodies like His and the Word of the Kingdom will have done what God intended it to do.

The application is straightforward: we can trust this Word to do what God promises. Hearing this Word in faith, being baptized into Christ, receiving the absolution of forgiveness of sins heard from the pastor as from God Himself, and receiving His body and blood in the Sacrament gives us what God promises.

The second parable of the mustard seed describes a small seed producing a large plant with branches. **“With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”** Again, the seed is the Word of the kingdom producing what God wants it to. How does this build on the first parable?

What is key is the seeming insignificance of the mustard seed because it is so small, yet it produces so a large plant that even birds can roost in it. The seed of the Word of the kingdom seems so insignificant, especially to those outside the kingdom. We are reminded that God's Word in Christ does big things.

Unbelievers are changed into Christians. Sins are forgiven. The sick are healed. The dead are raised to life. All of creation, which has been subjected to the futility of sin since the Fall, will be renewed and restored by God to its intended form and function.

God's Word of new creation has its counterpart in the original Word of creation. God created everything in the beginning by saying the Word, **"Let there be...and there was."** By the speaking of God's Word, big things happen, which is the basic point of the tiny mustard seed producing a big plant. We should not underestimate the power of God's Word when we hear it.

What about the **birds making nests in the shade of this tree?** Today's Old Testament Reading from Ezekiel 17 is instructive.

Thus says the Lord GOD: "I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest. And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD; I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it."

This is a prophecy of the coming Messiah, Jesus, the Christ. The seemingly insignificant Seed of Jesus, the tender sprig from the top of the cedar of King David's line, was planted in the earth at His death and rose a great tree. He was made low on the cross on Mount Zion, but exalted at His resurrection and ascension. By the tree of the cross all nations are saved. The birds Jesus and Ezekiel refer to are the Gentiles. Non-Jews also have a home in God's kingdom, making nests in this tree. By this tree we and all people are saved, and all who believe in Him will dwell forever in God's kingdom.

God's kingdom is like seed planted. God's Word does what it is supposed to and, though it looks small and insignificant, it is powerful, giving and sustaining faith and life now and forever. Amen.