

Jan. 29, 2021

Friday of the Third Week in Ordinary Time

Mark 4:26-34

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We are serious listeners to the words of Jesus because of that wonderful line in the Gospel: “to his own disciples he explained everything in private.”

In the parables, we recognize that at face value, they reveal one thing, but as long-term disciples, we know that there is something more to see and understand beneath these words and examples from simple daily life. Because we have long cultivated our “heart-eyes and ears,” we are drawn into searching for the something more. We are willing to suspend old assumptions and allow the Word to speak with fresh insight. These two parables are familiar: we can quote them, teach them and, for many among us, we can illustrate them.

Now, in the context of our morning worship, they are proclaimed again for us to hear anew and understand. We go deeper. Like a magnet pulling us forward, we pray them. When we do that, the familiar words give us new ways of looking, new ways of hoping and more ways to be aligned with Jesus’ most central dream: the Kingdom of God.

Here is an important truth: that the Parables of Jesus are unique to him. Those who spend their lives studying and poring over the ancient manuscripts of Scripture say that Rabbis, before the time of Jesus’ preaching, did not normally employ this style of literature.

This means, scholars tell us, that the parables in the Gospels come the closest we can get to the actual words of Jesus without the additions or edits of the later manuscripts. The Tradition of the Gospel Parables is trustworthy. We are standing right before Jesus when we hear the Parables. That in itself gives us pause.

When our fingers move along the words of the parables on the pages of our Bibles and when we allow our imaginations to enter the scene standing on the shores of the sea of Galilee or walking the roads of Palestine, we will hear his voice. It helps that Jesus is down to earth. His comparisons are drawn from the land, daily life, what is real in relationships and occupations of regular people.

The listeners find themselves in familiar scenes where everything is clear and simple so that even a child will understand. We can say along with them, “Yes, that is how it is ...” Yet, there is more to the story. It will result in amazement and wonder and sometimes will cut to the heart.

The Parables of Jesus have a lot to say about Life itself.

The Growing Seed lays the foundation of trust in the natural processes of growth: that the ground has the capacity to be fruitful beyond belief. Human activity is essential in the planting and in the final harvesting. But, as with serious gardeners and farmers, it is the “in-between

time” of waiting and sometimes the anxiety and the uncertain gap of time for the outcome that we must endure with patience and only in the end do we have the relief and joy of the outcome.

It is the “in-between time” when we know we are not in charge.

The Mustard Seed: size has nothing to do with results. Jesus, in this parable, stays with the small. God’s strength in the world doesn’t have to appear grandiose. A large bush with ample shade for all will do. Jesus’ words have wings. The images are open-ended. They fly on the wind of the Spirit in a direction but the only map is in the individual mind and heart of the listener, ourselves, where it is explained in private.

The parables carry us into realms that go beyond our first sight and hearing into a new level of wonder: from natural growth to the triumph of harvest and the smallness of a seed into the largest of plants with branches full enough for all the birds of the sky to find shelter. Our new level of wonder brings about the revelation that the Kingdom of God is here. In Jesus, we touch the Kingdom of God.

When I find it a tall order or a hard requirement to muster up wonder – let alone the impossible virtues of patience, trust and hope – because the in-between time is interminably long and the Kingdom of God feels obscure and I long for the restful shade of any bush, what always rescues me is children. They have an edge on wonder – their most vivid characteristic.

I was sitting with Elijah (5) and Danika (6). Together we were thinking about the Mustard Seed, looking at how small it is and then looking at a photo of a large mustard tree. Elijah asked: “But what will happen to the seeds?”

Me (unsure of what he was asking): “The seed that was planted?”

Elijah: “No, the seeds that are in the tree now.”

Me: “Oh, well what do you think will happen to all those seeds?” (my brilliant strategy!)

Elijah: “The wind will blow them down onto the ground and then some of them will begin to grow into more mustard trees.”

Me: “Ah, more mustard trees.”

Elijah: “Yes, More trees! And then they will grow and there will be more seeds to fall and more trees will grow and then again and again, it will keep happening!”

Danika: “It will never stop. Cool.”

It helps, doesn’t it?