

The Largest of Shrubs

Mark 4: 26-34

If I gave you one minute to name Kingdom of Heaven parables that Jesus tells in the Gospels, how many do you think you could list?

- The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field ...
- The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field ...
- The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard ...
- The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves ...
- The kingdom of heaven is like a great net cast into the sea and gathering fish of every kind ...
- ... like pearl of great price ...
- ... like a measure of yeast ...
- ... like a father who had two sons ...

Many of these are familiar to us and beloved. They have long informed and influenced our understanding of Jesus, our approach to discipleship, our vision of the church, and our hope for the promised age of reconciliation and peace. Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm writes that “It is the genius of parables to communicate big lessons with little stories, and in the case of Jesus’ parables to do so in ways that provoke our deeper understanding of God’s present and coming reign.”¹

As Wilhelm reminds us, we might consider that all of Jesus’ parables, indeed all of Jesus’ teachings - whatever the immediate topic -- speak to us about the kingdom of heaven; everything Jesus says shows the truth and promise of the reign of God. And we might point out that all of Jesus’ acts show us how to live in that kingdom of justice, peace, and love. It’s reasonable to conclude that Jesus’ teachings and ministry are quite full of and focused on parables and stories and statements about the Kingdom of Heaven.

And yet, the two tiny parables in the verses we have read today are the only explicitly named kingdom parables in Mark’s Gospel. It is Matthew who writes of magnificent pearl and of powerful yeast; he is the evangelist to describe a landowner who hires every laborer in the marketplace before the workday is done and a judgement day that separates sheep from goats. Luke provides us with stories of a Good Samaritan and a father with two sons. John does not include parables in the same way the other Gospel writers do, using instead the metaphorical

¹ Wilhelm; *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*; p. 79
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language of Jesus' "I am" statements to draw us toward greater understanding of who Jesus is and the kingdom to which he leads us.

Mark does include parables, but for Jesus' explicit words about the Kingdom of God, he gives us only two brief stories of seeds. If this is all Mark's Jesus will tell us about the Kingdom of God, then what can we learn from these parables?

In the first, Jesus speaks of a sower who randomly scatters seed upon the earth and then does not interact with it again until the crop is fully grown and ready for harvesting. There is mystery here in the time between sowing and reaping. "The gardener can put the seed into the ground but cannot really do anything about its growing."² And yet it does grow, ultimately producing wheat when the time is ripe, even though the sower does not understand how it has happened.

Mystery is, of course, an important element of Mark's narrative of Jesus. This is the gospel that hides Jesus' divine identity in what is called "the messianic secret". Throughout Mark, the disciples are portrayed as confused by Jesus' statements about himself; they misunderstand who he is and what he has come to do. Only the demons that Jesus banishes recognize him consistently. And they are consistently commanded to silence; forbidden to share their knowledge that Jesus is the Holy One of God.

This parable of the mysteriously growing crop also points toward God's sovereignty and ultimate victory over all the forces that oppose or threaten God's purpose. The harvest time will come, and the successful, abundant crop will be claimed.

The second kingdom of heaven parable which Jesus tells is even shorter. He proclaims that the reign of God is like a mustard seed planted in the soil. This smallest of seeds subsequently produces the greatest of shrubs.

When we read this tiny parable in which a tiny seed becomes a large sheltering bush, we should bear in mind the context in which and the audience for whom Mark was writing his gospel. Though Mark is the earliest of the four gospels, it was still written several decades after the life of Jesus, quite likely in the midst of Rome's growing persecution against Christians. Mark wrote for a young church, for this new community of faith that was yet small and weak in the world; that knew itself to be vulnerable to many political, religious, and cultural forces beyond its control.

We can imagine that those early Christians would have found much encouragement in this parable from Jesus of a tiny mustard seed which flourishes into a mighty shrub. In the face of

² Wendy Farley; *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3*; p. 140
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opposition from all directions, they had every reason to doubt that this new movement, their new “church” could survive, much less thrive. They would surely have been reassured by this parable’s message that modest, even unimpressive, beginnings do not determine ultimate outcome. They could see the potential of their budding community in Jesus’ image of a tiny seed that produces branches strong enough and numerous enough for all the birds to come and find shelter.

We hear this parable differently than those first Christians did because the church has been a great shrub for centuries now. Even with the recent downward trend in membership across Christian denominations, Christianity remains a powerful institution, with wealth and influence far beyond what Mark’s audience could have imagined.

So perhaps for us, the message of this parable lies not only in the magnitude of the mustard shrub’s growth but also in the purpose for that growth: *branches big enough for the birds of the sky to build nests in its shade.*

Israel’s prophets used such language as “all the birds” to refer to the nations -- not only Israel but also the neighboring lands and peoples. In Ezekiel, we find this promise from God: *I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out. ... On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit ... Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.* (17:24-23)

Jesus compares the reign of God to a tiny mustard seed which grows into a shrub large enough to welcome birds to its branches. The mustard shrub is like the reign of God because its abundant, extravagant growth provides a home for creatures in need of a home. We, as Jesus’ people, seek to bless this world through his church. How can we fulfill the promise of this parable? What “birds of the air” need a place to shelter in our world? Who might we welcome into the protection and provision offered by the resources the church commands?

In our case, within this congregation, we might shift our interpretation of the mustard shrub from metaphorical to literal and think of this building as the branches that have grown from the small seed of the original Presbyterian presence in McAllen.

Who has found shelter here? Who do we welcome into this space that the church has grown? Over the decades of this congregation’s life, the branches of our mustard shrub have welcomed many birds of the air. As pandemic restrictions ease and we resume many of the activities and interactions which have been paused over the past sixteen months, I know we will be grateful to be able to once again offer hospitality and support to a variety of programs and ministries.

We will be happy to see Lynn Flowers Presbyterian Pre-School open more classrooms to larger classes after the reduced enrollment which the past year necessitated.

The church has once again been asked by the RGV Literacy Center to provide space for citizenship and language classes, as we did for several years before the Covid-19 sent learning on-line. I will ask the Session to approve that request at this week's meeting.

We have secured the use of one of the currently unneeded Lynn Flowers classrooms to store, organize, and distribute donations for Puentes de Cristo. This will allow us to more consistently collect and more broadly solicit support for the work that Puentes de Cristo is doing in the *colonias* of Hidalgo County.

There are other birds of the air -- some familiar, some yet unknown -- who need a strong branch to provide shelter and nurture. How can we live out Jesus' parable and be a part of the towering, welcoming shrub that God can grow from the smallest of seeds?

Jesus tells many parables about the kingdom of heaven, the reign of God. May we have ears to hear the message of his teaching and hearts to respond to his call. May we show one another, this community, and the world what the reign of God is like.

Amen.