

Third Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
13 June 2021

Mark 4: 26-34

On the surface Christ's ministry was going nowhere. People come to him "in great numbers from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon" (3:8). At the same time, people are saying that "He has gone out of his mind" (3:21b.) Scribes from Jerusalem say, "He has Beelzebub, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons" (3:22.) Even his own family feel ashamed and embarrassed by him. Even the crowds seem more interested in his miracles and signs than they are in his message. Things are not going well. And then we get to this section of chapter 4 and Mark presents us with an amazing parable that is only found in his Gospel.

Jesus tells his disciples: '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. Earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.' In other words, even though we don't see the results of our efforts, God may be producing life-giving growth in that may person's heart. What is observable on the surface, may not fully represent what is happening in the fertile soil of a person's heart. Truth often takes a long time to reveal itself!

His ministry may not have been going well on the surface, but Jesus knew that his parables were like seeds in people's hearts, working slowly, changing people from within, producing the growth that only the Holy Spirit can produce in our hearts. We often become impatient that we have not achieved the level of holiness we wish we could accomplish, but we can never discount the fact that it is God who produces that growth in us, and it is him who will accomplish his will in our hearts according to his own timing. Jesus knew that his kingdom was becoming a reality in people's lives with every word of comfort that came out of his mouth, every small gesture of kindness and compassion, every engaging parable and story, and with every act of acceptance and love he showed his people. Those looking for grandiose theophanies were sadly disappointed. The Kingdom did not come with great explosions and thunderous shows of mighty power. The Kingdom was a relational reality that started with a brief encounter with Jesus and grew in the hearts of people overtime, to the point that it transformed their entire lives and the lives of their communities. Now, we do see spectacular actions in the life and ministry of Jesus, but his saving norm was the everyday interactions with people, and the preaching of the message of the Kingdom. This is where the actual miracles happened!

But my friends we live in a culture where we expect to see immediate results for everything we do. We pray to God in the morning, and we expect his answer by noon; we accept Christ as our Lord and Savior on Monday, and we expect all of our relationships mended and our life fixed by Tuesday. We apply our performance-based economic

models to our faith, and we forget that God's timing and God's way of judging growth is very different from ours. In no other area of our church life is this more apparent than in the area of evangelism. Many of our churches apply mathematical models and proudly count how many souls they won for Christ as a result of a crusade or an evangelistic speech, or a program year. Then they congratulate themselves for their efficacy as evangelists, proudly display their numbers in their church reports, as they move on to the next venue, in many cases never to see again the people they have evangelized.

Let me tell you a story about this. A few years back, I took 37 people from the Cathedral in Davenport, Iowa, to the "Christian Family Day" at the Cardinal's Stadium in St. Louis. After the game against the Padres was over, the Christian bands began to play and the "Guest Evangelist," a well-known national speaker, gave us a fiery sermon. At some point during his sermon, he asked that anyone who wanted to accept Christ as Lord and Savior please raise our hands and he would lead us in prayer. About half of the stadium, including 36 of the people I took with me, raised their hands and he led us in prayer. After he was done with his sermon, another speaker came to the stage and the program continued. At some point, I decided to go to the concession stand and passed near the preacher as he was talking to one of the organizers. He was very animated as he told the organizer, "I think we had about 5,000 people accept Christ today," to which the organizer said, "This is the largest crowd yet. We need to write this one up." After I returned to my seat I looked at my fellow travelers and what I saw was at least 30 cradle Episcopalians, who were already deeply committed and whose acceptance of Christ had happened many years before. It was obvious that for the organizers, Evangelism was an event and not a process of growth. Something that happens instantaneously. You must be able to see the results of your work. If you don't see it and hear it, it wasn't successful.

In the parable today, Jesus cautions us against this obsession with results. All we can do is plant the seeds and God himself will do the rest. The Christian life, in fact God's Kingdom, is about growth. It is a process and not just a destination. We are asked to plant the seeds and to let God do the rest. God doesn't ask us for success, what he asks us for is obedience. (Story of the Old Pastor if time allows.) Any of you who are farmers or gardeners know that there is not much we can do to make things grow. All gardeners need to do is to tend their gardens from time to time and to remove any obstacles to growth. We know that only God can guarantee the growth of our plants, but still, we stake our tomatoes, and we remove any grass growing around the plants. We ensure that nothing can choke the life out of our plants, and we remove any threatening barriers to growth, but even then, the growth is not dependent on us. God does the rest.

It is God himself who allows the earth to produce or not to produce. It is the same with the Kingdom of God. The word "Kingdom" refers both to a destination, or the place over which the king exercises dominion and authority, as well as the power or authority to "rule" as king (Stoffren, Exegetical Notes, www.crossmarks.com.) So, when we hear the expression, "the Kingdom of God" we can rightly think of Heaven, but we also must think of "the ruling power that emanates from God," "God's rule," "God's power." So,

the parable today re-translated says, “The Kingdom of God, or God’s power, or God’s rule... is like a seed planted, which grows from within the human heart totally by God’s own power and not by human efforts.” In the words of Eduard Schweizer “The parable with its assurance that the harvest will come stands in opposition to any form of doubt or care which, instead of waiting for God to fulfill his promise, endeavors to force the coming of the Kingdom or to build it -- by a revolution like the Zealots, by exact calculations and preparation like the Apocalyptists, or by complete obedience to the law like the Pharisees. Thus, the parable is asking if we are willing, for Jesus' sake, to wait with Jesus for God to do what he is sure to do, and if we are willing to wait with the carefree attitude which is becoming to the children of God, without any spiritual maneuvering or misguided efforts. To build one's life in this way -- entirely upon God's promise and no longer upon one's own ability or inability -- demands all the feeling, thinking, doing, and speaking of which we are capable” (Schweizer, Good News According to Mark, 103.)

Ultimately, this parable is about trust in the Lord. Christ is telling us “Trust in my promises, even if you don’t yet see the results of your evangelist efforts. Trust in my promises, even if you don’t always see the result of your praying. Trust in my promises, even if you don’t yet see the growth you desire in your faith or Christian walk. Trust and wait with me for the coming of my Father’s kingdom, even if you cannot speed the process through your human works. Trust in me, even as we ask for “God’s Kingdom to come and his will to be done,” knowing that this prayer demands that we place our entire lives under God’s power and God’s rule. Trust that God will accomplish in us what he has promised, not because our human efforts will make it happen, but because he loves us enough to help us produce the fruit that good disciples are bound to produce. But if you are not yet the best Christian you can be, don’t worry about it too much. We are all under-construction. God is still working in us and through us to build his kingdom. Be patient and let God accomplish in you what he will. God will bring you to a fruitful existence because it is his ultimate goal that you produce the fruits of the Kingdom.

Remember that the kingdom can be found in small gestures of kindness, in words of comfort, in smiles, and in acts of love. Be careful and judicious in what you say and deliberate in what you do to show others how much God loves them. Sometimes a word of encouragement is exactly the seed another person needs for his heart to begin to change. My mother used to say, “Se es o no se es. Por eso es importante saber quién somos y de dónde venimos.” (Either you are, or you are not. This is why it is so important to know who you are and where you come from.) We are God’s children sent into the world to build the kingdom. Our past, present, and future are held safely in God’s loving hands. We are called to a life of faithfulness. God produces all growth, and our task is to remove any obstacles to that growth.

Let God accomplish his will for your life in his own time. May his Kingdom come and may his will be done, Amen!