

A Mystery and a Surprise 2024
Judges 2:6-7, 10-13 Mark 4:26-32

Judges 2:6-7, 10-13 (New Revised Standard Version)

When Joshua dismissed the people, the Israelites all went to their own inheritances to take possession of the land. The people worshiped the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work that the Lord had done for Israel. Moreover, that whole generation was gathered to their ancestors, and another generation grew up after them, who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and worshiped the Baals; and they abandoned the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; they followed other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were all around them, and bowed down to them; and they provoked the Lord to anger. They abandoned the Lord, and worshipped Baal and the Astartes.

Mark 4:26-32 (New Revised Standard Version)

He also said, “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. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

Last week several of our youth were away to serve on a mission trip,
and in just a few weeks our volunteers will be getting VBS started.

In addition, some very wonderful and committed volunteers
provide the Young Disciples Talk every week during our worship,
and each week Sunday School is available for various age groups.

**Our church puts a lot into our programs, missions & other ministries.
But why do we do it? What is the point, and is it really worth it?**

The passage that we read from Judges provides some helpful insight
from when the people of Israel first moved into the Promised Land.

They were descendants of the slaves liberated from Egypt by God,
who were born during the 40-year wilderness journey of Exodus.

They had personally experienced the awesome and mighty power of God,
who provided water to drink and manna to eat in the desert each day,
and it was through those experiences that they had learned
to trust, obey and rely upon God... and according to vs. 7,

The people worshiped the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, **who had seen** all the great work that the LORD had done for Israel.

Our Call to Worship from Psalm 78 explains what should've come next.

We will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done...that the next generation might know them... so that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God.

But tragically, that first generation in the Promised Land,
neglected to tell the stories of their experiences with God

and to pass along their faithfulness to the next generation,

who then did not live up to God's truth & ways, vs. 10-11,

... that whole generation was gathered to their ancestors, and another generation grew up after them, who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and worshiped the Baals; and they abandoned the LORD, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; they followed other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were all around them...

Do you recognize what's being said here?

Because they didn't know or appreciate what God had done,
they accepted and adopted the false gods and unholy ways
and became enmeshed in the cultures all around them.

Ignorant, they abandoned their faith-inheritance,
and they foolishly turned against the God of their ancestors,
which eventually led to the destruction and exile of Israel.

The passing along of the stories & experiences of **our faith heritage**
a knowledge of God's gracious love helps lead our children to faith,
and that is the point and purpose of Vacation Bible School,
our youth mission trips and our other church programs.

Beyond the obvious teaching and lessons done in the classroom,
our children and youth also benefit from seeing and observing
faithfully committed adults living out their faith
in acts of service and in caring relationships.

Since this is Father's Day, permit me to offer a personal example,
from when I was a boy and my father decided that he and his sons
were going to build a boat from scratch in our basement.
So for Christmas, he gave us plans for building that boat.

Through that huge project, he taught us about reading design plans,
how to work with tools, craftsmanship and correcting mistakes,
but more than learning all those practical skills,
he also sowed seeds of faith, character and integrity.

On trips with Dad to buy wood, paint and other materials for the boat,
I got to observe my father in action, and through our conversations,

**I absorbed and learned from him much like osmosis,
about being a faithful & honorable Christian man.**

During that long multi-year project, even as a young boy,
I knew that the real gift wasn't the plans or even the boat,
but that Dad was giving himself, his time and effort,
and passing along the truth he lived, **his influence** --

**- a blessing that went beyond what he ever knew or planned,
and much like the wonderful volunteers at our church,
faithfully scattering seeds of God's grace,**

which is also the point of the 1st parable Jesus told in vs. 26-27,

He also said, "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.

The point is that after sowing the seeds, the growth just happens.

The farmer isn't making anything happen or controlling it,
it just grows and then later on there will be a harvest.

The farmer's limited role is emphasized further by noting

that the farmer is clueless about how the seeds will grow, vs. 27
the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.

and

The farmer's role is to keep on planting seeds,
even when he doesn't see any immediate results,
or even understand exactly how the growth occurs.

The point is, that we operate by faith, and we're not in control.

But we can trust that God is at work, and will accomplish his word.

The second kingdom parable is about a lesson based on contrast ----

about how tiny and insignificant the mustard seed appears,
and yet somehow can grow into a plant that is large enough
to provide shelter and hospitality to all kinds of birds.

Listen again to what Jesus said, vs. 30-32

"With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

This parable that Jesus tells is a lesson about God's grace.

In this second parable, the seeds grow like a weed,

into a shrub big enough to have room enough for all,

a picture of God's sovereign and life-giving grace,

the Lord's loving embrace with plenty of room for all,

which is the message of promise & hope, the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The seeds of faith are sown,

as by God's grace and intention our faith grows and strengthens
and we become faithful branches where others can find support.

Yes, I think the parable is really that simple,
that God's Kingdom grows as God's reign expands into our lives.

But sometimes we limit our understanding of the Kingdom of God
to just to being in heaven, that place we hope to go after we die.
But Jesus meant much more than just that.

More than just a place in the future, KOG describes a relationship.
It's the realm where God rules and reigns, as we submit to the Lord.
We become participants and a part of the Kingdom of God
when through Christ we follow in faith and walk with God.

We become a Christian by grace alone, and spend the rest of our lives
learning & experiencing how to live well as God's beloved children.

Seeds of faith can take a very long time to grow strong and fruitful.
In fact, sometimes it may take even longer than just one lifetime
for the seeds we plant to grow into full flower, as God intends.

Have you ever heard of Edward Kimball?
He was young Dwight L. Moody's seed-planting Sunday school teacher.

Later Moody planted his seeds of faith into Rev. F. B. Meyer,
a Christians writer, who became pastor to J. Wilbur Chapman,
who planted and nurtured seeds of faith
into the life of a pro-baseball player, Billy Sunday.

Billy Sunday became a well-known evangelist, and from his ministry,
led to another evangelist, Mordechai Ham, who was invited in 1934
to speak at an old-time tent revival meeting in Charlotte, NC,
where a young Billy Graham first came to faith in Jesus Christ,
whose seed-sowing you probably have heard about.

The writer of Mark, who chose to include these parables of Jesus,
did so as a reminder to encourage that faith community,
beset by trauma, discouragement, struggle to hope & doubt.

On Pentecost the Christian Church began boldly in Jerusalem
and that become the center and core of all Christianity.
Jerusalem is where the original disciples settled in
to preach, teach and wait for the return of Jesus Christ.

But then the nation of Israel rebelled against Roman occupation.
The war ended with most of Jerusalem being completely destroyed
and all the Jewish people were permanently expelled from the city.

The Gospel of Mark was written soon after the rebellion was crushed,
and the Jewish Christians had also been forced to leave Jerusalem.

For those Christians, the church they had always known was gone
and it was a terrible & devastating loss for that faith community.

They struggled to understand, **“where is God in all of this?,
and will Christianity even be able to survive without
the familiar church in Jerusalem they had always known?”**

In that first parable, they are reassured with a resounding yes,
that **the seeds will grow and produce**, for God gives the growth,
even without the farmer’s full understanding or intervention.

God’s Kingdom and reign are also like the mustard seed.

The church seems small, weak and insignificant,
**but God will bring growth, and it will spread,
and the Christian church did spread.**

As it was driven out of the familiar comfort of Jerusalem,
and had to go out and try to make a home out into the empire,
Christianity spread and grew to include gentiles,
producing branches for all of the birds of the air.

So what does this mean for us, in our time and situation?

No one would deny that these are turbulent and polarizing times
as we struggle with difficult and confusing losses and changes.

This is not an easy or comfortable time for our world or the Church,
**and so we need to hear and receive these parables afresh today,
as a faith-reminder that we do still belong to the Lord our God,
who is still working out his gracious purpose for our good.**

Part of the Gospel message today, is about our need to open anew
our eyes, hearts and minds to new and unexpected possibilities,
because sometimes, we just don’t see it or notice it.

One time at a Presbytery meeting back in North Carolina,
and our Division for Church Development was seeking permission
to rent a small farmhouse near where migrant workers lived,
and to allow a Presbyterian elder from Guatemala
to use it to hold worship services for the workers.

It was late in the afternoon, everyone just wanted to go home.

I was last on the docket as I explained our new project,
and our request passed easily without any discussion.

Then the Moderator of the Presbytery paused, looked at me and asked,

“Norm, did we just start a new church?”

Something significant happened, but most folks hadn’t noticed!

It was a tiny, seemingly insignificant beginning, maybe 20 people,
but at the next Presbytery meeting, I came with another request.

Our Division needed to rent a much larger farmhouse.

**From the seed of that tiny group of 20 migrant workers and families
God was working & building, & it had grown into several hundred.
From insignificant beginnings that are not obvious or clear to us,
God creates his Kingdom which embraces all of the Lord's loved ones.**

God is at work in the life, the mission and ministries of this church,
in ways that are not always clear and obvious, for sometimes,
it's in secret, that the Kingdom unfolds as God intends--

-- so even when we're not sure it's really making any difference,
or concerned that we're not doing enough or doing it well enough,
the kingdom of God, by God's grace still grows like a weed,
for it doesn't depend on us always getting everything just right.

Our task today is to remember who our God is,
to remember and trust God's steadfast faithfulness and wisdom,
that calls us to pay close attention,
to look and notice and connect where God is at work.

I think the parable really is that simple... as Jesus explains, 26~32

The kingdom of God ... is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds; yet when it is sown it grows up, becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.

Together, as individual Christians **and as the Church,**
our task and call is to keep planting seeds of faith and serve,
trusting the Lord to bring about a great and abundant harvest.