

Sermon Preached by Pastor Jennifer Rose

June 21, 2015

“Kingdom Specs”

Mark 4:26-34

Dear Friends in Christ: Grace be unto you and Peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

This summer is off to a wonderful start. We’ve had so much fun this summer already with many things happening for our young people. This week we’ve enjoyed a wonderful week of Butterflies Vacation Bible School and Luther Crest Day Camp.

There are so many great things about summer. BBQ’s, beautiful days to be out on the lakes, family vacations and time with friends, and it means that we are to the season of Pentecost in which we get to hear Jesus speaking in parables.

A parable is a short story that teaches something. It is different than a fable because fables usually have animals or plants or inanimate objects or forces of nature as characters, but parables usually have human characters. A parable is similar to an analogy.

Let’s take a look at some parts of the parable of the mustard seed. In the gospel of Mark it says that the mustard seed is the smallest of all the seeds but when it is sown it grows to become the greatest of the shrubs. Similarly, in the gospel of Matthew – first, Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its’ branches. And the Kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.

I have to admit that for much of my life, I’ve read these parables as something like a proverb: “big things sometimes have small beginnings” or “don’t judge something based on its size.” And this type of interpretation really makes sense on a superficial level, as each parable talks about something small – a mustard seed or a bit of yeast – growing into something big.

Until we remember, however, that actually – neither mustard seed nor yeast was viewed positively in Jesus’ world. Mustard was a weed, and farmers loathed it. It starts out small, but before long has taken over your field. We’d probably do well to substitute the word dandelion for mustard in this text. Similarly, In Jesus’ time, yeast or leavening was something that people understood as unclean or evil. Unlike the handy packets of dried yeast we have today,

leavening was done by letting some bread rot just enough in order to leaven a new batch of ingredients.

So...why would Jesus compare the kingdom of God to a weed or something that is seen as unwanted or unusable in everyday life? Well, it may be because both mustard seed and yeast have this way of spreading beyond anything you'd ever imagined.

And God's kingdom is like that! The Holy Spirit is far more potent than we'd imagined and it usually spreads in surprising ways, always in ways that are not controlled, oftentimes even in ways that disturb us and far from the way we think it should be.

My facebook news feed these days is filled with sad stories about the fate of the church. We hear sad stories about how the church is declining, how the millennials aren't coming anymore, how the church doesn't have any influence over peoples' lives anymore. Do you know who posts these things more than anyone else? I'll give you a hint: my news feed is covered with these stories. It's the clergy, those that are closest to the church, those who have spent their lives working for the church. They are nervous. They've spent their lives planting mustard seeds! They're worried they aren't growing. They're out there tending them, trying to fertilize them, trying to genetically modify the seed, trying to apply fertilizer and make sure they're watered.

But if I'm honest, I don't think that there is anything wrong with the seeds, with their water, their soil, or their fertilizer. I just think that the Holy Spirit blows in ways sometimes that we just can't control – in ways that disturb us and are far from the way we think it should be.

I'll give you a little piece of evidence of that: We had 44 kids, ages Birth-5 in Butterflies VBS this year. I think that must be something of a record. We had an incredible, well attended week of Luther Crest Day Camp. The mission trip that we are going on in a week is at capacity with every seat taken in the church van.

And you still want to tell me that the church doesn't have any influence, that millenials aren't coming, and how sad the state of the church is?

No friends – the Holy Spirit is blowing like crazy through this place. We all just need to learn how to listen for the blowing of the Holy Spirit among us. Maybe we need new glasses. Maybe we need an eye exam. Maybe we need to put on our Kingdom Specs.

The Holy Spirit works in mysterious, crazy, roundabout ways – ways that are hard for us to understand and visualize.

Think about it – a rag tag group of disciples, most of them probably teenagers, none of them professionally trained or educated – chosen by Jesus to be the first to go and share his word and make disciples of all nations.

Think about it – we could listen to the best public speaker in the world give a carefully crafted sermon about the deepest meanings of a text, but it would most likely not be as moving as when we hear the words of scripture being read out loud plainly and simply by a young child.

Think about it – of all the books written over time and distributed by great publishing houses – books written by great minds and backed by powerful corporations and lots of money to distribute them – still, it is the Holy Bible that is most printed and most quoted book by far. Even people who claim to be atheists can quote scripture – because there is something about this Word that sticks, that captivates even those who want to call it hogwash.

It doesn't make any sense and it never has and yet we who have experienced it know it to be true. God's Word isn't just words.

David Lose, president of the Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia expands on this – he says, "Jesus' parables remind us that the faith we preach and the kingdom we announce finally isn't an intellectual idea but an experience, an experience of the creative and redemptive power of God that continues to change lives. And sometimes the only way to get beyond our head and into our hearts is to, as Emily Dickenson advised, "Tell all the truth but tell it slant." And so parables come at us sideways, catching us by surprise to take our breath away at the beauty and depth of God's promises."

God's word does that to us! We could take all sorts of time to dissect what each parable means and the imagery Jesus used – but he used images and experiences people could understand in these parables so that we would know that the value to be found in these parables isn't something we have to dig deeply for – rather our understanding of them comes from how the words fall on our ears, how we experience them.

And perhaps mustard seeds and yeast and treasures buried in fields were great images for the times in which Jesus was teaching, they probably are still, but for those of us who don't really quite understand those images, I wondered how it would be if we were to take a cue from Jesus and construct a few of our own parables. How would that sound for each of us to try to describe those moments we have glimpsed the breaking in of God's own kingdom into our daily lives? I thought I would try my hand at that this week. How's this:

The kingdom of God is like a little boy who cannot sit still and is infinitely more interested in his orange balloon than listening to the lesson or singing the songs in Vacation Bible School –and

yet, when you ask him to tell you the Bible stories from the week, he knows every single one of them by heart and can sing every one of the words to all of the songs.

The kingdom of heaven is like a small group of people gathered at the graveside of their friend. Ancient words of scripture are read and as hot summer breezes move like a brush through the grass and the trees, they whisper that even in death, all things are being made new.

The kingdom of God is like when you are dead tired after four days of Bible school but then you hear a small child as she walks by you in the grocery store singing the words to one of the songs she learned and the lyrics are, "Lord I lift your name on High!"

Or one more: The kingdom of heaven is like the people of God gathering together – and some are happy, and some are sad, and some are angry, and some are full of faith, and some hardly believe, and some are tired, and some are old, and some are young, and some are rich and some are poor, and some are stressed out, and some are content – they all come together hungry for different things, but they come to Jesus' table, and all are fed.

May the Holy Spirit blow through this place, and through you, in ways that you'd never expect.

Thanks be to God. Amen.