

**4 Pentecost
June 17, 2018**

**In the name of the God of all Creation;
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus;
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

***"The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ..."
"With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It
is like a mustard seed, ..."***

Seed scattered on the ground. A mustard seed. The kingdom of God.

Before we get to the "seed scattered on the ground," or the "mustard seed," let's take a look at this "kingdom of God" that Jesus talks about. At times I may use the term "realm of God" instead of "kingdom of God" since it is more gender inclusive, although I realize it may weaken the metaphor just a bit.

You see, when Jesus was using the term "kingdom of God" he was pitting it against another kingdom ... that of the Emperor Caesar Augustus. The Emperor was ... by definition ... a divine person in the Roman Empire. Jesus was saying that there was another king, namely God. This put Jesus and Caesar at odds ... and that is what got Jesus killed.

However, Jesus also said that we could live in God's realm even while we are living in the realm of the Emperor. That is what "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's; and render unto God what is God's" means.

First, I do not believe that Jesus was using "kingdom of God" as a reference to another place else, or another time in the future ... such as in heaven after we die. I believe that Jesus was talking about the here and now. The realm of God can be right this moment ... in this place. The realm of God is that state of being when we are one with God in our hearts, bodies and soul ... and when we act in ways that God intended for us to act ... toward others and toward ourselves. When that is primary, then we are living in the realm of God regardless of whatever ruler there may be in the world around us.

This is the way that noted author Fredrick Buechner puts it:

"If we only had eyes to see and ears to hear and wits to understand, we would know that the Kingdom of God in the sense of holiness, goodness, beauty is as close as breathing and is crying out to born both within ourselves and within the world; we would know that the Kingdom of God is what we all of us hunger for above all other things even when we don't know its name or realize that it's what we're starving to death for. The Kingdom of God is where our best dreams come from and our truest prayers. We glimpse

it at those moments when we find ourselves being better than we are and wiser than we know. We catch sight of it when at some moment of crisis a strength seems to come to us that is greater than our own strength. The Kingdom of God is where we belong. It is home, and whether we realize it or not, I think we are all of us homesick for it."

So, if the realm of God is a potential within us, just what would it look like in our lives today? For one, we would treat others the way we would like to be treated. We would see every other human being on this planet as a fellow child of God, worthy of love, respect, and being treated with dignity. We would care for the sick, and feed the hungry, and provide clean water to the thirsty, and visit those in prison, and shelter the homeless, and offer clothing to the unprotected. If the potential of living in the realm of God were a reality in our lives we would welcome the stranger, console the grieving, and offer our strength to the weak. In the realm of God we would not be inflicting the emotional wounds upon innocent children by separating them from their parents as they seek safety in a new land.

When we live the reality of the potential contained in the realm of God, it benefits not just those with whom we encounter in our lives, but it benefits us as well.

In the first parable Jesus tells in this week's reading from Mark's gospel, a gardener scatters seed on the ground, and then goes off to sleep. The seeds fend for themselves, and when the grain is ripe, the gardener harvests it. In the second parable, someone sows a tiny mustard seed in the ground, and it grows into a gigantic bush, large enough to offer birds shelter in its branches.

Both of these parables, insofar as they're meant to show us what the realm of God looks like, are somewhat ridiculous. As is the case with all of Jesus's parables, these are intended to stretch our imaginations far beyond any place we'd take them on our own. They are not designed to keep us comfortable and complacent, but to prod and provoke us into wholly different ways of perceiving and relating to what is sacred. What's the realm of God like? Are you sure you want to know? The realm of God is like a sleeping gardener, mysterious soil, an invasive weed, and a nuisance flock of birds.

Let's start with the sleeping gardener. If you're any type of perfectionist, workaholic, neat freak, or compulsive worrier ... if you insist on being in control, if you believe in work before play, if you practice vigilance in all things ... then you already know what's wrong with this first parable. I'm not a gardener ... but I like to garden. Even I know you don't just toss a bunch of seeds into your backyard and then snooze away the growing season. A real gardener makes neat little rows in well-manicured beds. They keep a wary eye on the weather. They protect their gardens from birds, squirrels, and insects. Last year, in spite of my best efforts, the birds and squirrels feasted on figs ... I was able to salvage only one for myself. From early spring until harvest, real gardeners water, fertilize, prune, weed ... and they worry.

But the gardener in Jesus's parable? He scattered seeds and then sleeps. He didn't provide any real effort. He didn't micro-manage. He didn't second-guess. Like a well-loved infant in his

mother's arms, the gardener enjoyed the deep rest that comes from trusting in a process much older, larger, and more reliable than any they might conjure on his own. In this story of the realm of God, it is not our striving ... or our piety ... or our doctrinal purity ... or our endless, impressive prayers that cause us to grow and thrive in God's garden. Miraculously, it is God's grace alone.

Which brings us to the mysterious soil. According to Jesus's parable, the realm of God is both prolific and hidden, both generous and mysterious. It works its fertile magic underground, deep beneath the surface we see. Yes, the soil eventually brings forth all kinds of abundance, but the process of that bringing forth ... all the nitty-gritty details we long to see ... is hidden from our eyes. If anything, we live in the disconcerting time ... the liminal time ... between the planting and the harvest. We look outside, full of hope ... yet see only dark soil ... a vast expanse of uncertainty on the one hand, and a delicate potential on the other.

In Jesus's second parable, a sower sows a mustard seed in the ground. The joke here is not only that mustard seeds are tiny, but that the people in Jesus's day didn't plant mustard seeds. Mustard was a weed ... and a noxious, stubborn weed at that. If a first century gardener in Israel were foolish enough to plant it, it would quickly take over his land, dropping seeds everywhere, and breaking down all barriers of separation between itself and the other plants in the garden. Imagine a gardener today planting kudzu, or air potato vines, or dollar weeds. These are commonplace nuisances we try to get rid of, not plants we'd ever cultivate on purpose. Mustard, moreover, is not a plant that grows with any stateliness or beauty. It's nothing like a cedar, or a giant live oak, or even a well-tended rose bush. It grows like a weed, and it looks like one.

So what is Jesus saying when he describes the sacred and the holy as a tiny, insignificant mustard seed? What does it mean to take an invasive, spindly weed ... a plant we'd sooner discard than sow ... and make it the very heart, the very structural center, of God's realm? It raises the question: "Who and what counts in God's economy? Who matters? Where do we see the sacred?"

The last image in this set of parables is that of nesting birds finding shade in the branches of the mustard plant. It's a pretty image on its face, but it, too, as it turns out, is a joke: who wants birds taking up residence in their gardens? Birds eat seeds and fruits. They can wreak havoc to a fig tree. Birds are why farmers put up scarecrows.

But, Jesus wasn't a scarecrow kind of gardener. Why? Because the realm of God is all about welcoming the unwelcome. Sheltering the unwanted. Practicing radical welcome and inclusion. The garden of God doesn't exist for itself; it exists to offer hospitality to everyone the world deems unworthy. It exists to attract and to house the very people we'd rather shun. To give safety and shelter to those who are threatened.

This is what the realm of God looks like. It isn't always what we think it might be. It doesn't operate the way we think it should. This is good news, but it isn't always easy news. The truth

is, it is difficult to surrender our imagination to God's expansive, life-changing care. It is risky to trust, to accept mystery, to seek God in the commonplace, and to embrace the unwanted thing as beloved. Living in the realm of God is good news, but it has a cost ... it means we have to overcome our fears and prejudices.

For me this week, the challenge is to find God's kingdom in the midst of the world's events. To trust and to wait for the promise of abundance that lies in deep darkness. For all of us, regardless of our circumstances, the challenge remains to scatter seed and rest in God's grace. To embrace even the weeds, and allow them to become havens of rest. May God help us to do these hard and beautiful things. However, we must remember that we have to first scatter the seeds ... there is no harvest without them. And, scattering the seeds in this situation may be expressing our opinion on things that matter to us to our elected officials ... who just might do something about it. This morning, as we pray the Lord's Prayer, may God help us to say and to live these words with all sincerity: "your kingdom come."

I'll end with another quote, this one from Robert Mulholland in his book ***Deeper Journey***:

"When we pray 'Let your kingdom come,' we aren't asking God to bring history to an end and whisk us to realms of glory, or to wave a magic wand and solve all the problems we face in our life. Rather, we are making a radical commitment to live our life in the world in such loving abandonment to God that the values and principles, the perspectives and dynamics of God's realm of life and wholeness become incarnate in and through our being and doing. Here, too, we are utterly incapable of actualizing the kingdom in this way. We can, however, through loving abandonment, allow God to incarnate kingdom life in and through us in the circumstances of our daily life."

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"With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, ..."

Amen.