

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 06/16/2024



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Third Sunday After Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, June 16th

Mark 4:26-34

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Mustard seeds rather than programs

Two agricultural parables of the Kingdom of God feature in this week's Gospel lectionary – the Parable of the Seed Growing and the Parable of the Mustard Seed. These parables are both optimistic and cautionary. Optimism comes from recognizing how the Kingdom will grow, often quietly and in secret, according to God's timetable and inevitable outcome. This is also cautionary in that many times across church history we have sought to usher in or even build the Kingdom through our own efforts.

Mark 4:26-34 Commentary

This week's text should be read in the context of the Parable of the Sower (4:1-20).

²⁶ And he said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. ²⁷ He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. ²⁸ The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. ²⁹ But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

The Parable of the Seed Growing is only found in Mark. The Parable of the Sower (4:1-20) indicates that some seed will fall on the rocky path, be sown amidst weeds, or be eaten by birds, but some will fall on good soil and take root. In this parable, the process by which the seed grows is automatic and subtle. The man scattering the seed does not know how the seed grows but the earth grows the seed by itself, in stages, beginning with a barely noticeable blade breaking through the ground. Eventually the seed will bear fruit (grain – *karpos* can also be rendered as fruit). The man sows the seed and harvests the fruit – the rest is up to God. A seed once planted is a mystery being revealed running on God's timetable.

³⁰ And he said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? ³¹ It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, ³² yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

The second seed parable in the text compares the Kingdom to a mustard seed and notes how such a small seed can eventually produce a large plant that can spread and takeover a field.

³³ With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. ³⁴ He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything.

Mark records only representative parables. Jesus is speaking here to the crowds and disciples. To the crowds, the parables would spark interest, a desire to hear more, and perhaps leading to a deeper commitment. Jesus reveals greater meaning to His disciples.

Reflection and Application

Mark's community was at odds with a world that was already chaotic and transforming. As Jesus followers they would likely have experienced persecution from many sides. To them, the Kingdom may have appeared small amongst the imperial context of the world they lived in. The two parables in the text gave optimism. The Parable of the Seed Growing indicates the nature of God's reign – the Kingdom will come regardless of whether people want it or not. The process is automatic, like a seed growing and bearing fruit. The community must spread the word and trust God will do the rest. The Parable of the Mustard Seed would have helped the small, persecuted community see beyond their small size to what God would make possible.

Both of this week's parables have a history of interpretation that reflect the issues important to the church at that time. In the social gospel era, the interpretation of these parables stressed the inevitability of progress of God's reign on earth. Life would continue to improve and through human effort; the Kingdom would continue to grow. Massive human efforts of social activism and reform were marshalled to build the Kingdom on human soil. The mood was optimistic, but the violence of two world wars shattered this illusion.

Today we are living through another era of massive social change as well. There are still those who seek to build the Kingdom through human effort and pursue human-defined social justice as the primary expression of Christianity. With collapsing church membership and recognition that we are now living in a post-Christian society, many in the church see consumerism as the answer and seek to redefine the church to better meet the needs of today's society. There are also a growing number of Christians who may be beginning to feel more like Mark's community.

The parables this week emphasize how the consummation of God's reign is not dependent upon our best efforts nor do our relative success or failures determine God's plans. This is, in fact, quite liberating! God determines the harvest in His own good time. The Kingdom continues to be shrouded in mystery and we must be careful not to go off on our own and build our own version. Rather than the latest and greatest church program or next idea for political activism, the Kingdom grows quietly automatically through small acts of planting seeds. A random act of kindness to a stranger, a willingness to have a holy conversation with a neighbor out of love, a living demonstration of the Good News, an invitation to do life together are all mustard seeds planted for the Kingdom. These parables are thus both optimistic and cautionary. As Paul writes in Galatians 6:7, "*Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.*"

