

2) PARABLES FROM MARK

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

Mark 4. 1-34

Again Jesus began to teach beside the lake. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the lake and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the lake on the land. ²He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching, he said to them: ³'Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. ⁶And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. ⁷Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. ⁸Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.' ⁹And he said, 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'

¹⁰ When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. ¹¹And he said to them, 'To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; ¹²in order that

"they may indeed look, but not perceive,
and may indeed listen, but not understand;
so that they may not turn again and be forgiven." '

¹³ And he said to them, 'Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? ¹⁴The sower sows the word. ¹⁵These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. ¹⁶And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. ¹⁷But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. ¹⁸And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, ¹⁹but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²⁰And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.'

²¹ He said to them, 'Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand? ²²For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. ²³Let anyone with ears to hear listen!' ²⁴And he said to them, 'Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you. ²⁵For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.'

26 He also said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.'

30 He also said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³²yet 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.'

33 With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Mark 12. 1-12

12 Then Jesus began to speak to them in parables. 'A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watch-tower; then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. ²When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard. ³But they seized him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. ⁴And again he sent another slave to them; this one they beat over the head and insulted. ⁵Then he sent another, and that one they killed. And so it was with many others; some they beat, and others they killed. ⁶He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, "They will respect my son." ⁷But those tenants said to one another, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." ⁸So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. ⁹What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. ¹⁰Have you not read this scripture: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; ¹¹this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes"?''

12 When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him and went away.

Mark 13. 28-30

28 'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰Truly I tell you; this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.

Mark 13. 33-37

³³Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'

COMMENTARY

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS NOT IN YOUR CONTROL

Control is something we all want. We want to have control of our future, control over our health, our finances, the welfare and success of our children, the well-being of those we love. But life is such that many important things we cannot control. Just take aging, for example. The process of aging can be described as a process of losing control, control over our health, our ability to do what we want, the well-being of those we love, our own well-being, our minds, and on and on it goes.

What is fascinating about the parables in Mark is that they focus on the theme of control. The kingdom of God (i.e. the love, grace, forgiveness, reconciliation, mutual caring, generosity, joy, fullness) which is the basis of God's relationship with us, is not something we can control. We cannot control its growth. We cannot determine where it will and will not grow.

What we cannot control we will fear or mistrust... or we can learn to trust and to let go. We can learn to allow ourselves to be challenged in our attachments, what or who we hold on to or push away, the layers of security we build around us to control life. The difficult news is we may have to give up our control. We may have to trust God as we embark on new ways, on a new journey in how to live life, set our values, our commitments, our priorities. We may have to trust God as we open up our hearts and our wallets, expand our attitudes towards others, becoming more generous in our judgments of them.

But the good news is that we are promised a flourishing we could never make for ourselves if we alone are in control of our life and destiny. We must let go and give up some control in order to be opened and taken into new horizons of inner abundance and peace. The parables in Mark begin to address this theme of our inability to control the kingdom, and the challenge for us to trust and open up our hearts to God through Jesus.

Mark chapter 4 offers us parables about seeds and the purpose of parables.

3-8 - The parable of the sower comes first. Later Jesus will provide an allegorical interpretation (allegorical means that each character and element in the parable represents someone or something). But the parable itself without the allegory has a basic point. What is it? Seed is being sown. It is sown indiscriminately, on all kinds of

ground and soil. Only a minority of the seed grows. However, the seed that does grow offers a yield that is astonishingly bountiful. What is the point? Seeds fall where they may. We do not know in advance, nor can we control the growth. They grow invisibly. Yet the kind of growth that takes place within the kingdom of God is astonishing, unexpected, rich in all kinds of ways we could never anticipate.

Here is an example. You have had a prolonged, low-grade conflict with a longtime friend. There are certain topics you can never talk about without conflict. You keep things civil, but it is not easy. But through your spiritual convictions you begin to sow seeds of kindness, generosity, compassion, patience, forgiveness (you don't return what you receive negatively, you don't give as good as you get, you begin to let it go through much prayer and meditation). Then at some point, unexpected, at an odd time of life, there is a change from your friend, an opening, a fresh easing of the tension. There are tears, there is new energy in the relationship. You even go to places you have never been together before. How and why has this happened? The seeds have given an unexpected and astonishing yield. But we cannot control when, where and how this happens. This is an interpretation.

13-20 - But Jesus gives his own interpretation as well, an allegorical one. There is the sower of the Word, the devil, and people who respond in different ways to the Word. Some are too shallow, and the Word cannot go deep. Some are too materialistic and pre-occupied with getting this and that. Some make a good beginning, but life's stress, strain, disappointment, and suffering sap their trust in and zeal for God. But then there are those, a minority, in whom the Word sinks in, grows, and bears rich fruit of faith, hope and love. How does this apply to you? For me, I see different strains of each of these responses in myself. It is also helpful to recognize different times in my life when one or another of these responses would have been more prevalent.

26-29 - This parable is a short one that simply re-iterates the invisibility of the seed's growth and the fact that we cannot control its growth. What we can do is place ourselves so that we receive the seed and once received, cultivate the soil in us so that it may grow.

30-32 - What the parable of the mustard seed adds to the above is that the seed is often small, so small it's invisible, yet the fruit it can yield can be astonishingly grand in its own distinctive way (i.e. a mustard tree is not a cedar!).

THE PURPOSE OF PARABLES: On the one hand, parables are meant to disclose a truth (21-22); but on the other, they are meant to hide the truth (10-12). Those who are sincere and open will begin to get it, those who are fixed on their own ideas of the kingdom of God and controlling its outcome, will not. The most common popular conception of the kingdom of God was a geographic area (Palestine) controlled by Jews and pushing out all foreigners. But this would require adopting the tactics of violence inspired by hatred, mistrust, and vengeance. Jesus' vision of the kingdom was diametrically opposed to the popular one. Hence, he presented it in a more subtle, concealed way requiring some attentive discernment, imagination, and inner conversion of heart.

12: 1-12 - This parable builds on what was just stated above. There are conflicting visions. This parable provides an interpretation of what has happened in the relationship between God and God's people. They have been entrusted with a mission. By being a beacon of God's kingdom vision, they would be a light to the world. But they have turned against God. God sent God's servants, prophets, and leaders, to try to get them to return to God's way. They have rejected and abused them. Finally, Jesus has come, God's own son. And he is about to be killed. This parable is more explicit and less hidden. This is the final week of Jesus' life. He is coming out into the open. The religious leaders who hear the parable immediately get it, and this only makes them more determined to kill Jesus. They do not want him to convert the masses to his vision and away from theirs.

13: 28-30 - The parable of the fig tree is also obvious in its meaning. The evidence for what Jesus is predicting will happen (the destruction of the nation of Israel, its temple and capital city) is there for those who care to see it. Jesus' vision conflicts with the vision of the religious leaders and the most popular visions of the kingdom which have to do with land, territory, race and who holds power by force. Jesus is saying that the popular vision will lead to destruction. Jesus' message is God's warning to them. But he will be rejected and killed like those prophets who came before.

13: 33-37 - We cannot control where the kingdom will grow and how. We cannot control when it will come. Control of the future is something we all want. How do we live without it? Some want to make it happen. This leads to all kinds of destructive consequences. We step over people. We push them out of the way or use them to serve our purposes. We are anxious and worry. We build walls of security around us. Jesus says that what we need to do is watch and wait faithfully. We need to keep awake, cultivate the spiritual discipline of faith, hope, and love, and leave the kingdom's coming and flourishing to God. This is especially hard when there is no sign of the kingdom's progress, but only greed, violence, selfishness, fear, indifference, and isolation. But we must not lose our commitment, allegiance, and faith. May God help and inspire us.

FOR NEXT WEEK: Read Luke 10: 25-37; 16: 19-31; 18: 1-8, 9-14.

THEME: The reign (or kingdom) of God shows up where you least expect it.