

The kingdom of Heaven Is Like ~ K.I.S.S. Mark 4:26-34

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."

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."

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. (*ESV*)

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, my favorite Navy uniform was "summer whites." It is a simple uniform that looks great. Some sailors called it the "Good Humor" uniform because it reminded them of the man outside the ice cream truck. The informal summer uniform consists of a white combination cover, a white open-necked, short-sleeved shirt with military creases front and back, white trousers with a white belt and polished or anodized brass buckle, white socks and white shoes with white laces. All that white makes the black and gold shoulder boards and multi-colored rows of ribbons pop. When I was a chaplain recruiter I often teamed up with the Army chaplain recruiter for seminary visits. One day the Army chaplain recruiter asked me, "Whatever you do, Rory, please don't wear your summer whites. I don't have a uniform that can compete."

Summer whites, a sharp uniform with a major problem. How do you keep all that white, white? It nigh impossible. If you brush against a desk or automobile, you will probably have a dark smudge on your white uniform. If you give your wife a hug, you probably will have powder on your collar. If you walk across a dusty parking lot, you will probably have brown dust in all the crevices. If you eat a jelly donut, you will probably have raspberry filling on your shirt. When you live in a dirty world you attract dirt.

Now imagine God sending his spotless, sinless son, a tender young twig according to Ezekiel, to be born under the law to redeem those under the law. I am not saying that he brushed up against the world and was covered with dirt, but in a sense he was. He did not remain spotless for long, but it was not his job to remain spotless. He fulfilled the law in all things, fulfilled it in our behalf, and was sinless. However, he came to cover himself with our sins, our disobedience, our hatred, our selfishness and our greed. The sinless became sin, white became black, the innocent became guilty, but the guilty became innocent! God placed Jesus' summer whites on us. And I just completed a parable, or as one of my professors explained it, a protracted metaphor. Jesus used a number of parables, extended metaphors in our text to clarify the kingdom of God. The purpose is to take something difficult, or totally foreign and make it

understandable by comparing it to something with which people are familiar.

There is an acronym in the Navy, one familiar to many people, known simply as K.I.S.S. “Keep It Simple Stupid!” That is what Jesus did when he spoke with the people. How can we who are fallen, spiritually blind and deaf, get our heads around the kingdom of God and His plan of salvation? Jesus kept it simple. He told parables, two of which we find in this morning’s text. “The kingdom of heaven is like...” “And with many such parables He spoke the Word to them as they were able to hear it. But without a parable he did not speak to them” (vs. 33).

I. You cannot force the kingdom.

Exciting things were happening at the time of our text. Jesus’ teachings and miracles astonished the crowds. His fame spread quickly through the communities. They marveled at his authority and wisdom. He spoke about the kingdom, about its presence. However, to many hearers something was amiss. If the kingdom had arrived, why were the Romans still in charge? If the kingdom had arrived, why were God’s people still oppressed? If the kingdom had arrived, why was there evil, suffering, and disease?

Knowing that there were questions and misunderstanding, recognizing that there was confusion, Jesus sat down in a boat just off shore and began teaching in parables. K.I.S.S. Keep it simple. The kingdom had come but it was like the tender twig in Ezekiel, like the tiny mustard seed. Both would grow, both would tower over everything else around them. Both would provide strength and protection.

We look around ourselves today and wonder the kingdom may have gone. Where did all the marks of the kingdom go? God’s church competes in a marketplace of religious alternatives, of worldly philosophy and “the scientific method.” What is the new catch-phrase: “trust the science.” What has happened to the kingdom that appeared about to burst into glorious bloom? Did it come and we missed it? Jesus had promised, “...not even the gates of hell will be able to overcome the kingdom of God.”

We cannot force God’s kingdom to grow among us. The ancient farmer understood something we have not learned. We select our vegetables and fruits from bins at Publix or Aldi and we think they spring into existence full-blown. Seed takes its own time to sprout and grow to harvest. There was little that ancient farmer could do to speed the process. He removed as many of the rocks as he could, prepared the soil with his wooden plow, dug his irrigation ditches, tended his terraces, and scattered his seed. Sensible farmers waited patiently and trustingly for God to bring the seed to maturity and fruit. The farmer might pray for a good crop but God was in control.

Like a harvest the kingdom comes of “itself” as far as we are concerned. Maybe I should clarify my use of the term “kingdom” at this point. Jesus defines it as God’s gracious rule in the hearts of his people. We read in Luke 17, “Once having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, ‘the kingdom of God does not come visibly, nor will people say, ‘Here it is’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom is within you’” (vss. 20-22).

We cannot make the kingdom happen. We sow the Word and God gives the increase but we have often failed to be as patient and calm as the ancient farmer. It frustrates us when it seems there is no response to our witness. Sometimes we may conclude that all our seed has fallen on hard-packed, dry soil or among kudzu vines. We observe brothers and sisters in Christ fighting with each other. We see marriages fall apart and children abused. We face opposition and persecution. We see epidemics and death, war and pestilence, greed and crime. Where, Oh, where is the kingdom? What happened to the Word? Are we working in vain?

The kingdom comes -- through God's activity and power. Amazingly, such simple things as proclaiming the good news of Jesus in worship or sharing it with a friend accomplish great things because the Word carries God's power. The Apostle Paul beautifully stated, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation, to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16). God working through the Word creates faith in the sinner's heart. He breaks up the hard-packed, parched soil and plants the seed. God nurtures the tender seedling until it becomes a mighty tree or like the mustard plant. Just as the seed contains the fragile cotyledon, so the word carries life within itself. We, the church -- preachers and teachers and laity -- serve as God's farmers casting the seed into a dying world on soil God has prepared or is preparing.

II. Don't Despise It!

The kingdom may not look like much at present, but look at it with God's eyes. Marilyn has a necklace she received as a child. The necklace consists of a silver chain to which a little glass globe has been fastened. The globe contains a mustard seed; it is not a diamond or an emerald or a sapphire but, Oh, the life contained in that seed. Remember what it can become. It can grow big enough to shelter birds and other animals.

Jesus proclaimed the kingdom but so little seemed to change. Life was hard. Death was a frequent, unwanted visitor. Hunger and thirst, pain and desperation afflicted many. Thieves and the dishonest appeared to prosper while the righteous languished. Where was the kingdom, the change, the relief, the good times? When it seemed that Jesus was on a roll -- he entered Jerusalem to adulation -- his ministry and life came to an abrupt end five days later. The authorities slapped down the upstart preacher and crucified him. What kingdom?

But was it really gone with Jesus' crucifixion? Certainly, it continued to grow as it had earlier. Jesus who ascended to the right hand of God rules over the kingdom from a better vantage point. His disciples and those with whom they shared the message carried the seed further afield. The Word continued to work behind the scenes and now has spread to all parts of the globe. Many times when things seemed at their worst, the kingdom flourished. When emperors sought to eradicate the message it became more vigorous.

We still grow disheartened on occasion when it appears that the Word has made so little progress. We dedicate ourselves to teaching and sharing, witnessing and loving, praying and singing, and yet, we get discouraged and wonder why. The very last day before I departed my first congregation to report for my first assignment as a Navy chaplain, I was waiting for a court summons. I was informed that it would be delivered to my office door by 4:00 p.m. Two members of my congregation were taking each other to court. Each side wanted me to testify on

their behalf, even when I stated that I would hold everything shared with me in my position as pastor in strictest confidence. Along with the suit and counter suit, there was some very unchristian name calling, property damage, and atrocious behavior. As I packed up my office I wondered what I had accomplished in four years. It is sooo easy to concentrate on the wrong things.

Jesus warned us that the neighborhood around his kingdom would be like this. Frequently on Saturday mornings at my last congregation following the men's breakfast and Bible study, you could find me wandering the front gardens and parking lot with a gallon pump sprayer of weed killer. It seemed that no matter how many times I sprayed the weeds, they kept returning, even in the middle of an asphalt parking lot. The kingdom of heaven is like a weed that grows everywhere and won't die. It sprouts, spreads its seeds, and moves to a new spot or returns to an old one. It does not stop; it cannot be defeated.

This is the manner in which the kingdom works. It takes God's understanding and eyes of faith to observe the kingdom moving and growing. Occasionally the world seems to have the upper hand, at others the kingdom. But the final victory belongs to God. Somewhere a long the line in the this sermon I lost the K.I.S.S. principles, "Keep It Simple Stupid!" However, here it is. The final victory belongs to God. His Word will not return to him without accomplishing the purpose for which he sent it. Paul writes in our Epistle for this morning, "So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are not at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, be of good courage..." (5:6-7).

Damascus is one of the oldest cities built by man. There, as everywhere in the Near East, one is oppressed and distressed by the dominance of a fierce anti-Christian religion. Damascus, today, is one of the sacred cities of the Muslim world. What once was the great church of St. John the Baptist has now for centuries been an Islamic mosque. Standing in the shadow of the tomb of Saladin, the great Muslim general, one can hear the muezzins call the faithful to prayer from minarets of the mosque that once resounded with hymns to Christ. Reflecting on this, and hearing strange music, one's faith needs to be strong. On one side of the mosque, where evidently there had been an entrance to the ancient church, there is still to be seen and not obliterated by the new worshipers, some words carved in stone. Getting close enough by whatever means, a person finds these words and takes new hope and courage for the future of God's kingdom -- "Thy kingdom, O Christ, is an everlasting kingdom!" Have we the faith to see, and, meanwhile to do our parts? It really is simple! Amen!

May the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen

Soli Dei Gloria!