

SECOND SUNDAY OF PENTECOST
LECTIONARY YEAR B

by Rev. Emily Chapman
June 14, 2009

9:45 a.m. Service of Word and Table



ST. PAUL'S
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Lectionary Texts:

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13; Psalm 20 or Psalm 72; 2 Corinthians 5:6-10 (11-13), 14-17; and Mark 4:26-34

Mark 4:26-34

²⁶He 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.”

³⁰He 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.”

³³With 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.

I am blessed each week to read the Lectionary passages for Sunday morning with a couple of groups of people in Bible study. We read the text and talk about the stories and what they might mean for us. Our discussion on the Gospel passage this week began with the comment from one person “I hate the parables.” This is not an uncommon response to these somewhat confusing stories. They raise questions as to why Jesus didn’t just say what he meant, why he was always leaving people scratching their heads and wondering what in the world all of that was supposed to mean? People have been trying make sense of the parables for centuries, trying to determine exactly what they all meant and why Jesus would choose to use such veiled expression.

But let’s look at what Jesus is getting at here. These are Kingdom parables — illustrations used by Jesus to teach about his coming Kingdom. The Kingdom of

God, as with many of Jesus' teachings, is something that is a mystery too great for our human comprehension. So Jesus uses the simplest possible language, the every day things of life to try to allude to something for which there are no words. This is what Jesus does – takes the ordinary and reveals the divine. For example, on the night before he gave himself up for us, he took bread, broke and gave it to his disciples and said "Take, eat, this is my body given for you." Bread and wine, two staples of table life at this time, two of the most ordinary things. Jesus takes them up and reveals himself in them. But still, we cannot fully understand the presence of Jesus with us at communion, just like we cannot fully understand the coming Kingdom.

The Kingdom of God, for which we pray each week in the Lord's Prayer, is that promised time when all things that are wrong in the world will be made right, a dramatic reshaping of the world as we know it into the world as God sees it. But wait. The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. A mustard seed? By tradition, a mustard seed was the smallest of all seeds, making it a favorite for illustrations about faith. It is a tiny seed. Perhaps we are to remember in this illustration that God's reign on earth began in tiny insignificance. This baby born in a stable to an unwed teenager, who grew into a peasant teacher with a rag-tag group of followers. And they weren't much to write about either. Often despised, misunderstood, and confused. These were the people that were going to change the world?

But a seed doesn't stay a seed forever. Eventually, it grows and becomes big enough to offer shelter to other creatures. It doesn't start out as much, but it grows and develops. God works in even the smallest thing to bring new life to earth. It's just a little seed. But God uses it. We don't always come here looking like much. We come tired and worn down, we come trusting in our own strength and not God's. Our love for one another is often broken and imperfect. We hold grudges, we complain. We don't look like much. But look what God can do with not much.

It's hard to wrap our minds around the Kingdom of God. We cannot do anything to make it come faster, and we know that the work of the Kingdom is God's. So what do we, this sort of rag tag group of followers, do? How are we to act in this world while we wait for the reign of God to come and let the oppressed go free, to

feed the hungry, heal the sick, wipe away our tears? We cannot do all of that in our own power, so we start with what we can do. We know that we are just tiny little seeds. So let's celebrate small beginnings. We have to spend time in this world looking for signs of the coming Kingdom, sometimes pointing it out for others. This isn't always easy...after all, once we get a glimpse of the world as it should be, the world as it is becomes even more painful. Every once in while, we see a moment just as God sees it. Who knows where it happens, maybe in nature, maybe in worship, maybe gathered for dinner with brothers and sisters in Christ.

It could be anywhere, but I am willing to bet that you've seen it at some point, felt a moment in which the Holy Spirit was present, a thin place between the ordinary and the divine. It may not last long in this life, and then the times that you feel far from God are even more painful. But we are followers of Jesus, who is bringing about God's Kingdom that is like the mustard seed. In this world, we see trouble all around us, but everywhere there are seeds of the Kingdom just growing and waiting for someone to come along and water them. It is not our job to grow the mustard bush, but we are entrusted caretakers of the field. We are limited by our humanity. We can only see so far ahead, our faith has moments where it wobbles and even falls through. But if we know ourselves to be children of God, we know that hope abounds. God has a dream for humanity that is greater than we can imagine, but we have been graciously invited to participate in God's dream for the world, in bringing about a more just society, a place where love and mercy are shown in all things, a place where we know that belong to God and to all of our brothers and sisters.

We cannot realize God's dream on our own; after all, it is God's. But we are given the privilege of walking the journey as God's beloved. One of the curses of sermon research is that one never fails to find someone who says it so well, it cannot possibly be said any other way. So I close today with the words of Salvadorian martyr Archbishop Oscar Romero, who said:

It helps now and then, to step back and take the long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection, no pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about: We plant seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capability.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own. Amen.