

The Secret Smallness
March 4, 2018
Mark 4:21-34, Zechariah 4:6-10a
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
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*To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit
<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2018/03/sermon03-11-2018.mp3>*



This is a photo of one of my favorite trees in the world, the baobab. Baobabs are found in many parts of Africa, as well as in India, Ceylon, and Australia. They are curious and majestic trees for all sorts of reasons, including the fact that they grow slowly and deliberately and can seemingly live forever. It's estimated that a mature tree such as this could be as many as 5,000 years old. In fact, I once saw a photo of some of the first Scottish missionaries posing under a baobab tree near Lake Malawi in the late 1800's. Next to that was a picture of their descendants in the same spot that was taken a hundred years later. If a viewer were to compare the photos, that person would discover that the individual branches of the tree are essentially unchanged – even after the passing of a full century. These trees are seemingly impermeable to change. Remember that.



¹Since Advent, we've been walking through the Gospel of Mark. We heard in chapter one, verse one, that it contains the good news of Jesus, the Son of God. Thus far, we've gotten a little bit of background on Jesus and, more importantly, we've gotten to see him at work. After bursting onto the scene announcing that the Kingdom of God is at hand, He's healed people, driven out demons, garnered great attention, elicited significant reactions, and gained both followers and foes. In the first section of his Gospel, Mark is crying out to the reader, "Look! Pay

¹ *The Calling of Saint John and Saint Andrew*, James Tissot (c. 1890)

attention! Something really big is happening! This guy is worth listening to!”

And, in chapter four, we get to hear what he says. Mark 4 represents the longest stretch of teaching about the Kingdom from the lips of Jesus in the Gospel. We’ve been told that it’s important, and we’ve been told that it’s at hand. Last week, we heard the single longest parable about the Kingdom as we listened to the story about the farmer and the seeds and the various types of soil. In that, we heard that the Kingdom is God’s idea, and that we are called to be receptive to it and to allow that Kingdom to do its work in us, on us, to us, and through us.

In our reading for today, Jesus continues this teaching by apparently piling on the parables of the Kingdom as if they were bullet points – three quick comparisons given in short order.



Just after explaining the parable of the sower to his followers, he says, “You know, as I think about it, this stuff is like a lamp. It’s significant. It’s out there in the open. It’s public!” As soon as he’s finished talking about the necessity for those who would follow him to be receptive to the work of the Kingdom in their lives, he warns them that this is all to be done for all to see; that nothing is secret forever, and that their lives will be visible to the world.

Eugene Peterson, in his book *Practicing Resurrection*, says much the same thing about those who would live out the Kingdom ethic in our world:

Church is an appointed gathering of named people in particular places who practice a life of resurrection in a world in which death gets the biggest headlines: death of nations, death of civilization, death of marriage, death of careers, obituaries without end. Death by war, death by murder, death

by accident, death by starvation. Death by electric chair, lethal injection, and hanging. The practice of resurrection is an intentional, deliberate decision to believe and participate in resurrection life, life out of death, life that trumps death, life that is the last word, Jesus life. This practice is not a vague wish upwards but comprises a number of discrete but interlocking acts that maintain a credible and faithful way of life, Real Life, in a world preoccupied with death and the devil.²

I think that Peterson is spot-on when he talks about a *real* community – with *named persons* engaged in *intentional practices*. It's not just an idea – if the Kingdom is visible anywhere, it's visible in time and space through the lives of people – people like, well, you and me.

Now, understand me: this part is not in the Gospel of Mark, but here's what I think happens next: I think that Jesus uses the parable of the Sower to teach about the Kingdom of God and then he offers these warnings about everything happening out in the open and people paying attention and having ears to hear and that causes at least some of his followers to shift their feet a little and maybe start avoiding eye contact. I think that more than a couple of these fellows get a little nervous and glance at him questioningly as if to say, "Um, you see, Lord, well, the thing is... do you know us? Because, er, we're not really all that special. We screw up. A lot. And most of us can be pretty unreliable at times. If you're counting on your named, particular followers to be doing all this stuff in public, well, you might want to rethink a few things. You might have to find some new followers who aren't as likely to, you know, get it wrong."

The reason I think that something like that must have happened is because of the tenor that Jesus' teaching takes next:

Conversation on Growing Up in Christ (Eerdman's, 2010), p. 12



he goes right back to the language of farmers and seeds.

“Maybe you didn’t get it during that last story,” he says, “so here it is again. The Kingdom is like a seed that is scattered on the ground.” He tells a story about a seed that is self-contained and sufficient. The *seed*, he says, has everything it needs to produce fruit. As he tells this story about the man who scatters seed and then goes about his daily business, he’s reminding his disciples (then and now) that the Kingdom doesn’t need us to somehow try harder in order for it to work. Somehow, mysteriously, the seed is set into the soil and the seed itself – the Kingdom – does its work. And when the seed is lodged in soil that is receptive, amazing things happen – things that the farmer can’t begin to understand.

“Don’t worry that sometimes you can be such knuckleheads,” Jesus is apparently saying. “This isn’t about you. It’s about what God is doing in and through the Kingdom.”



He then takes a quick breath and dives into another comparison. “Not only is the Kingdom like a seed,” he says, “it’s like a *mustard seed*.”

You probably know something about mustard seeds. If you’ve ever bought pickles, you’ve probably seen some of them swirling around in the jar. They may not be the tiniest seeds, but they’re pretty small. And yet when planted, they become a shrub or bush – sometimes getting to be ten feet tall. In addition to providing these seeds, the greens and even shoots of the mustard plant can be eaten and thus provide nourishment for humans and animals.

So, let’s follow Jesus’ teaching here... the Kingdom is like something that is given or placed amongst us and it grows on its own. It is self-contained and mysterious, but if we allow it to flourish in our midst, it will produce fruit that is



useful. Moreover, Jesus says, there will be such abundant growth that this Kingdom blessing will spill over into other spheres. Birds will have perches and shade.

But here's something that maybe you didn't know: mustard is an annual plant. That is to say, it has to be planted every year. Unlike the oak tree in your yard and certainly unlike the baobab tree that I love, a mustard shrub lasts for a single season. And while it may be large by garden standards, a ten-foot mustard plant cannot compare with the magnolia out front of this building or the pine tree in my yard. Compared with these, the mustard is a tender, vulnerable plant.

So here's the good news for today, at least as far as I'm concerned. Do you remember that big baobab I talked about? The large, leafy, majestic tree that seems to last forever? According to Jesus, in this context, that's a horrible tree with which to compare the Kingdom of God.

The problem is, though, that in my mind's eye, I want the Kingdom to be like that. More specifically, I want the kingdom in my life – or in your life – to look like that. I want it to be tall, strong, unchanging and unbending. I want it to survive centuries of conflict and human error. And, in some other places, Jesus tells us things that lead us to affirm that the Kingdom of God is able to do that.

But here, he seems to be saying that the Kingdom is planted in and designed to take root in lives that are vulnerable. It grows in people who are, in some ways, well, shaky. Sure, a bird can perch in the branches of a mustard bush, but you're not going to want to live in a house made out of that plant.

If you plant a maple seed or a baobab, you might get something big. But it's going to take a long time before you even know if anything is happening, and a really, really long time before

you wind up with anything useful.

But the Kingdom of God, in this scenario, at least, is not like that. Instead, we are invited to participate in a Kingdom that appears to be small and mysterious; as an annual plant, mustard depends on new growth coming each year, and new seeds being produced, and then sown, and grown, and harvested, and then the whole process starts again next year. What a relief that is to losers like the disciples, and me, and you!

Listen: your life of faith is not meant to resemble some sort of statuesque tree that once upon a time had a single planting and since then has thrived through decades of unbroken growth and stability.

I think that instead, our lives of faith are reflective of the fact that the Kingdom calls us to be changeable, flexible, growing, and giving. That is an encouragement because when I sense that I'm in a period that's difficult, I don't have to give up, or think, "Well, this life of faith clearly isn't for me, or else I'd look like that perfectly formed statue of the ideal Christian..." Rather, I claim the truth that Zechariah espoused: that the Kingdom is rooted in God's power, and in God's power, small things can win the day.

I'm afraid that too many of us, too much of the time, see the life of faith as a list of answers to be memorized or a series of principles to be learned or, even worse, a series of behaviors to do in front of my neighbors so that they see how holy I am.

But I think that Jesus calls us to a life that is characterized by a willingness to continue to start at the beginning, to look for ways to grow in insight and then apply this insight to new situations, and thereby to grow fruit in season after season of life.

20th-century philosopher Eric Hoffer said, *"In a time of drastic change it is the learners who inherit the future. The learned usually find themselves equipped to live in a world that no longer*

exists.” I think that in these teachings about the smallness and vulnerability of the Kingdom, Jesus is encouraging his followers to become learners, rather than learned; to be those who know the importance of asking the right questions as opposed to spouting off the right answers; to be those who are willing to engage in the process of the journey and not merely obsess about where we’re going and when are we going to get there.

So here’s the deal, beloved! Give yourselves a break. Let go of the expectation that you have to be perfect. Instead, give yourself ever more to the Kingdom that is growing amongst you. Offer shade where you can. Keep throwing seeds, even when sometimes you wonder if it’s doing any good. And keep asking questions. In doing these things, we are becoming, day by day, more fit disciples of Jesus the Christ, and – by his grace – better able to live in the world that will greet us tomorrow. Thanks be to God! Amen.