

How Inclusive Is Our Tree?

The Parable of the Mustard Seed



Mark 4:26-34 Ezekiel 17:22-24
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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The gospel writer Mark declares, "Jesus said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?'" Parables, Jesus' primary method of teaching, are remarkably insightful nuggets of wisdom undergirding the very mission and ministry of Jesus, which, to put most simply, is ushering in the kin-dom of God in the here and now, and into the future. Parables demand something of us. They ask us to *respond* to the opportunity to be enlightened and transformed in some way. The question is whether or not we will allow a transformation of our thoughts, attitudes, and actions to take root in our lives.

I want to address the phrase, "kingdom of God". **The word "kingdom" is obviously hierarchical and monarchical language, thus shunned by most progressives. In the first century, however, it was used as an in-your-face radical political claim countering the kingdom of Caesar. Yet today, in contrast, many substitute 'kingdom' with words like realm, reign, rule, dominion, or household of God. Increasingly, the word "kin-dom" is the choice by most progressives because it reflects a much deeper egalitarian relationship of God's beloved community.**

This kin-dom reflects what the world would be like if the ways of God were truly expressed in how we live our lives and structure society – if God's will was fulfilled "on earth as it is in heaven", to quote the Lord's Prayer. It's a way of living and being in relationship with *all* of creation, which we understand primarily through Jesus' teachings to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. This kin-dom is to be a place of peace, equity, and justice, where everyone is treated with equal respect, dignity, compassion, hospitality, fairness, and full inclusion.

No one parable, however, reveals all there is to know about the kin-dom of God in our midst. So, we're fortunate that today's lectionary contains two of what are known as the collection of "seed" parables. These two, as we will see, are enhanced when looked at together. Both are intended to encourage the community of faith with confidence in the dawning and expansion of God's kin-dom.

The first, often called **The Parable of the Seed That Grows Secretly**, which is found only in the Gospel of Mark, states someone scatters seed on the ground then goes about the ordinary routine of daily life, sleeping and rising each day. However, this person doesn't know how the seed sprouts and grows to maturity, producing grain ready for harvest. We learn, in part, our role in participating in the growth of the kin-dom of God is to scatter and plant seeds. We do that through our words, actions, and attitudes, which as a community of faith reflects our mission and ministry efforts inside and outside the church.

Like planting real seeds in a garden, however, even with all the nurture we can provide, we don't always know if and when the seed will germinate and grow. That remains a mystery. It is most likely parents who know best what it is to plant seeds in the

hearts and minds of their children, not always knowing how those seeds will take root and grow. And yes, that growth often happens secretly. Hopefully, you can find encouragement and comfort in this parable. For each and every time we interact with another human being, we have the opportunity to plant seeds of love and kindness and compassion, even if that involves discipline or standing firm in what we believe is the right thing to do.

This parable also teaches us that it is foolish to think that we can build the kingdom of God on earth, or within ourselves, by our own efforts alone. Although we must strive constantly to be effective signs of its presence, its establishment and growth are accomplished by God alone through unmerited grace. We must be careful not to imply that the plant grows because of our hard work. Again, the focus is that the growth of the kingdom of God is mysterious, and up to God. God's grace is at work within us, through us, and, often, despite us. God, however you understand the nature and character of God, is at work in us and in the world around us.

This leads into our second parable, a more familiar one known as **The Parable of the Mustard Seed**. This very tiny seed is not much larger than the head of a pin. Yet, when it matures, it becomes a very large shrub. It is large enough, in fact, that birds can make nests in the shade of its branches. This parable emphasizes the contrast between its tiny beginning and its great conclusion. It shows us how great things can come from small, even unpromising beginnings. You may have noticed examples of this principle in your life, perhaps in your occupation or within a relationship. **What may seem almost insignificant to you or me at first may grow into something strong and beautiful.**

Here's something to think about, however. **Unlike how this parable is most often interpreted, is Jesus really referring only to the growth and spread of Christianity in this and other parables?** While I used to believe so, I no longer do. After all, **Jesus was a Jew and there was no such thing as Christianity when he first told these parables.** That doesn't mean we can't find meaning in them as it pertains to the growth of Christianity, but I don't believe they were originally that exclusive. After all, **Jesus' wasn't referring to the church or even organized religion, but rather, the "kingdom of God," to use its scriptural language,** therefore referring to the entire human family. It becomes an entire way of life and being in relationship, using the ways of Jesus as our guide and model, as opposed to what we refer to as "the ways of the world." Again, in Jesus' day that particularly meant the ways of Caesar. In other words, the kingdom of men, not of God.

Since this parable is one about growth, biblical scholars are convinced that Jesus was well aware of the ancient images used to describe Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. The key to understanding why Jesus compared the kingdom of God to a mustard seed lies in how people compared the kingdom of Israel to a mighty noble cedar tree, like we heard in this morning's Old Testament reading from Ezekiel 17. Ezekiel tells us how God is going to take a sprig from the very top of a mighty cedar tree and plant it on a high and lofty mountain, a reference to Jerusalem. Of this mighty cedar, Ezekiel writes, "Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind." I'm sure that you noticed that Jesus used a nearly identical phrase in his parable of the mustard seed.

This phrase, "all the birds of the air," was a well-understood figure of speech in the ancient world of the Bible. As mentioned, it was a phrase used by Ezekiel to describe God's intention for the nation of Israel to be open and inclusive of those from other nations. Picking up on this, **Jesus used this same phrase to talk about God's intention for the inclusive nature of the entire kingdom of God – that it is accessible to all**

peoples and nations of the world. This notion would have been a horribly disturbing thought to those ancient Jews who pictured *themselves* as the *only* ones included as the people of God. This is a horribly disturbing thought today to those Christians who fancy *themselves* as the *only* ones allowed to make their nests in the branches of the kin-dom of God. And we wonder why so many people today are deciding to simply turn their back on the church – not on God, but on organized religion and the exclusionary ways practiced by so many.

It was in the midst of this exclusionary attitude that Jesus talks about God's kin-dom as being amongst the common and ordinary, like a mustard bush, instead of the high and mighty, like a cedar tree. A mustard bush grows to only about 10' tall and grew wild throughout the Judean countryside, almost like an unwelcomed invasive weed. In contrast, the cedar tree grows to 100' tall and was found exclusively in Lebanon. **That comparison is called parody and Jesus used it to poke fun and even criticize.**

Jesus says that the kin-dom of God, like a wild mustard bush, may very well upset the ordered, conventional status quo. That's why I like to **consider College Hill as a mustard bush, often (and with intention) challenging and upsetting the ordered, conventional status quo. Yet, our own inclusivity and hospitality are also being challenged and put to the test.** Therefore, our hope remains in God and God's grace, that we will continue to move and grow ever closer to that vision of living fully into the kin-dom of God.

Amen.

Resources:
Feasting on the Gospels
Feasting on the Word