The Invasive Realm of God

A meditation on Mark 4: 26 – 34

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church June 13, 2021

One corner of a painting, the refrain of a song, one chapter of a novel – none of these tell the whole story, do they? And so it is with Jesus’ parables about God’s realm, God’s dominion. Each parable offers a glimpse of one aspect of the mystery. These pieces can’t be assembled like a 1,000 piece jigsaw puzzle, but rather they are designed to inspire wonder, to invite curiosity, to take a peek at life through the eyes of God. Mark writes “with many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it.” Small tastes, small samples. Some easier to digest than others. Some soothing like velvety chocolate mousse. Some spicy like salsa. Challenging and humbling. Designed to keep us rooted and nourished.

It might even be helpful to think of Jesus, as some anonymous person once said, as the living parable. Could that be one of the most insightful ways to describe the incarnation? Parables, writes Karoline Lewis, are for “exploration, not explanation.” Maybe that works for Jesus, as well. Lewis writes:

…”at their etymological core, parables are not linear interpretive exercises. A parable is something that is thrown alongside — para, alongside, and bole, from the root ballein, to throw or cast. When you place something alongside something else you have just made problematic a meeting of the two. Think of something as simple as parallel lines. They will never meet. Likewise the parables and that which we put alongside them may never meet either, as hard as we try. Rather, there is a constant alignment that forces you to go back and forth between the two. As a result, interpretation lies in a mutual, reciprocal, even circular motion and not in a one-to-one, end result expectation. This means not only will you see the kingdom of God differently, you may also see the parable differently. And if neither will ever meet along their parallel journey, there may be no end to what you see.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

That sounds like one of those responses your parents would give you when you were a kid…an answer that’s not really an answer, evasive and open-ended. Those evasive and open-ended responses leave us feeling a bit unsteady, but also hopeful and expectant. So it is with parables.

Today we have two: the mystery of the seed, and the surprising mustard plant. Mysteries and surprises are perfect plot lines for parables. If you think you know exactly what a parable means, if you are confident that you have solved the riddle of a parable, it probably means you need to go back and read it again, live with it some more. Ask different questions. Especially if a parable leads you to a place of judgement of yourself or others. Introspection is distinct from judgement. We must continually reflect on our actions, our choices. But judgement? Judgement involves labels of good and bad, right and wrong. Boxes in which we can place ourselves or others, shut the lids and go on our way. Judgement is not our job. So when you read the parable of the forgiving father – maybe you know it as the prodigal son – be careful if you find yourself judging *either* son. Be careful if you find yourself criticizing the father. Another - The parable of the two houses built on rock and sand, remember that one? One survives the flood and the other does not? How easily we can slide into labeling others as sand foundation people and rock foundation people. How quickly we beat ourselves up for not having built a stronger foundation for our lives, when it may be more about circumstances that were beyond your control.

Let us allow parables to foster our own growth – both individually and as a community – but let us not ever use them as a scale upon which to evaluate ourselves or others. Parables are intended to expand our understanding of God’s mercy rather than place limits around it.

A seed is planted and grows under the soil in silence and mystery. The person who scattered – who threw – the seed upon the ground goes on about their life. Sleeping and rising. The seed scattering one cannot speed up the sprouting, cannot control the growth, but they can wait and watch. They can observe the different stages of growth. They might even go out and talk to the plants in the early morning, sing a little song of thanksgiving. And when the time comes, they will gather in the crop, that it may be used to nourish life. “The earth produces of itself,” writes Mark. (NRSV, v. 28) “The earth produces crops all by itself.” (CEB, v. 28)

So much of life that is outside our control. And so Mark reassures the struggling community of Jesus followers to wait, to watch for the hopeful seeds of God’s kin-dom to sprout and grow. Maybe not in their lifetime. But one day. A word of hope for God’s church *today* as it experiences what could be interpreted as a fallow season. So many betrayed by churches of all denominations, so many turned away…an “erosion of the soil” which we have caused, writes Jeffery Tribble, Sr. “A shameful history of less than exemplary practices associated with missions and evangelism…forced conversions, inquisitions, fraudulent television preachers, religious wars, crusades, genocide, colonization and expansion of Western power throughout the world have contaminated the ‘ground’ where we seek to sow seeds.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Is it any wonder that growth seems snail paced?

And even within ourselves, sometimes the growth seems slow, hindered. When all we seem to be able to do is stare at the soil of our souls and long for something living to appear, we must remember that God is present. Though we may rise and sleep and sleep and rise, God never rests. God’s hands continue to pour out blessing upon the soils, that life may emerge from the rich, holy darkness.

And so we wait and we watch, but there is something we can do even as we acknowledge how much is beyond our control. We can prepare the earth to receive the seeds. We can feed it and care for it, protect it from toxins that would harm it. Work the compost into it (There’s a parable we need - the parable of the compost? The parable of the garden manure?) Let it rest when it is tired, and turn it gently when it has grown hard. We can remove the stones that would prevent the roots from reaching down into the depths. None of that guarantees growth, and it all exists beyond the scope of this parable, but we are invited to wonder.

Deceptively simple, some parables.

Our second story is the mustard seed parable. One that I have known to be loved by children. They connect with such a tiny seed that can grow to such epic proportions, amazing everyone. A tiny seed that accomplishes great things, providing shelter for the birds. All birds.

But we grow up, and we learn about “invasive species,” and mustard falls into that category. We try to eradicate non-native plants when possible because they choke out the indigenous ones. There’s an irony for you in light of our nation’s recent practices regarding welcoming immigrants. Some invasive species can be dangerous, toxic to cattle or other creatures. Of course we all know about kudzu, and I have preached on it before in relation to this parable, but I was curious about other invasive species in Alabama. On the website invasive.org you can find a list of 91 invasive plants that have been identified in our state. Some of their names are Sweet breath of spring, Blessed milkthistle, Tree of heaven. It’s a shame that they have such lovely names, and it’s true that we don’t want them to crowd out the plants that are genuinely needed.

But what if we could imagine them crowding out what is not needed in God’s garden? Prejudice, discrimination, dishonesty, oppression, bitterness, resentment, judgement. What if “Sweet Breath of Spring” could eradicate resentment? Or “Tree of Heaven” could choke out bitterness? What if the good, wildness of God could overwhelm all that causes pain in this world?

In Jesus’ story, he chooses a simple seed, a tiny seed. He doesn’t offer a story about God’s realm compared with the cedars of Lebanon. He compares God’s realm to a seed that might have been sown by a bird as easily as by a child. When uncontrolled by a human’s pruning shears, it bushes out, reaching heights of ten feet. When allowed to grow unchecked, it spreads, providing grown cover and shelter. It does this with total disregard for what humans might want it to do. You don’t want birds in the garden. But maybe God does. All kinds. The bossy sparrows and the naïve doves. The noisy jays and the lyrical wrens. The owls. The hawks. The starlings. Starlings?? But they are so invasive!!

What if we allow this invasive mustard plant, with its pungent aroma and thick branches to flourish in its own way? We aren’t always comfortable with how God is working in the world: using humble things, using ordinary things. Not fancy, not powerful, not impressive. Sending a poor child of uncertain birth, penniless and powerless, dependent upon the gifts of others, to show us how to live, and move and have our being. Expecting us to do hard things, like feed an enemy, welcome a stranger, live with mystery. How might you live with holy discomfort this week? How is God’s invasive love seeking to choke out all that you do not need in order to thrive? May you live with this discomfort and be blessed, knowing that

God’s love surrounds you, clothed in simplicity.

Thanks be to God, who is crowned in mystery and delight. Amen.

1. Karoline Lewis, Workingpreacher.org, A Life in Parables, June 5, 2015. [A Life in Parables - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/a-life-in-parables) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Elizabeth Johnson and Cynthia Jarvis, eds. Feasting on the Gospels: Mark, Westminster John Knox Publishing: Louisville, 2014. Jeffery L. Tribble, Sr. p. 132. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)