

PARABLES AND POWER

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Texts: Psalm 20 and Mark 4: 26-34

I want to begin by asking you to shut your eyes. I know that is a risk on a warm Sunday morning in June, but it is a risk that I am willing to take. You need to be able to use your imaginations for a bit and imaginations function best with a minimum of distractions.

Close your eyes and imagine that we are all there at the Sea of Galilee. We are part of a large crowd that has been following Jesus. Can you see the white caps on the water? The breeze is brisk, a good sailing day, but it is hard to see the ripples that mark the movement of the schools of fish so the families who make their living fishing are none too happy. There are so many of us that Jesus is being surrounded and is moving closer and closer to the water. Look, he is getting into a boat and we are filling the beach with some of us actually standing in the water. We want to learn more about The Way; that is the title that people are giving to the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Listen Jesus has begun to speak.

Now, open your eyes, as well as your ears, minds and hearts to the teachings of Jesus recorded in the gospel of Mark, the fourth chapter beginning with the 26th verse. Jesus said:

“The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

He also said:

“With what can we compare the kingdom of God or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which when sowed upon the ground is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet 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.”

“With many such parables, he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.”

Well, I don't know how you feel after hearing that lesson. Even after imagining ourselves as part of the crowd that heard the words as they were spoken, are we any clearer about God's reign, about the kingdom of God, than we were before hearing the parables about seeds, sickles,

and stalks? What do these things have to do with us? How do these parables help us understand the power and might of God's rule?

We want to know, probably as the original hearers wanted to know, what the Kingdom of God is. And we want to be told what it is in plain straightforward language without confusion or hidden meanings. But Jesus, in trying to teach his followers about the kingdom uses parables, little stories, word pictures. So his followers then and now are left with the challenge of figuring out what the kingdom is by living it out. And I believe that is the point.

The Kingdom of God is not about understanding, using our intellect to comprehend every nuance of the concept of living under God's rule. The Kingdom of God can only be glimpsed occasionally and then only from the inside. Only as we seek and sometimes struggle to live life as God intended; thankfully sharing God's gift of life and cherishing and caring for those with whom we share that gift – only then do we get that occasional glimpse.

The mystery of it all is indicated in that parable that began our second lesson: "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how."

We do not know exactly how the reign of God comes about. And in the face of such a powerful mystery we use images, metaphors, stories, parables.

It is the same when it comes to describing God. We use images like rock and fortress and light and refuge and judge and vindicator and of course the most frequent image, father. But none of these images, or even all of them taken together, no words can capture all of God's nature. God is beyond describing. Our brothers and sisters who are conservative or orthodox Jews recognize this impossibility of capturing in words all that God is. They will not utter a name of God but instead use the phrase, "Ha Shem." It means the name. It is a way of saying God and God's love and God's nature and God's kingdom are all beyond our ability to describe or even imagine.

One of my favorite authors, Frederick Beuchner, in a wonderful little book called *Wishful Thinking* does about as well as anybody could in describing the Kingdom of God. Beuchner says:

"The Kingdom of God is not a place, of course, but a condition. Kingship might be a better word. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, Jesus prayed. The two are in opposition.

Insofar as here and there and now and then, God's kingly will is being done in various odd ways among us even at this moment, the kingdom has already come.

Insofar as all the odd ways we do God's will at this moment are at best half-baked and halfhearted, the kingdom is still a long way off....."

It is a good description but it still falls short.

It is the same with many of the powerful mysteries of faith. In just a few minutes we will baptize seven beautiful children. We will use a lot of words to describe what is going on, and

they will be good, sensitive words, but ultimately all the words will fall short of describing what baptism means. But as Josie, Mireille, Henry, Madison, Charlotte, Emma and Frances are brought forward, as their parents make promises, as you in the congregation make promises, we will begin to create a kind of parable. It will be a living parable.

It will be a picture of what baptism is. As Barbara and I and Dr. Jensen speak the names and put a bit of water on the heads of these children, as we say words that have been said for nearly 20 centuries, the living parable will become even more powerful. Then as these children are taken into the midst of the congregation, as we see that most of them understand nothing of what is going on, and as we look at these children that we have promised to nurture, showing them the love that God has for them, then maybe, just maybe we will have a picture to carry with us forever. And if we listen, behind the crying and the fussing that will probably occur, beyond the oohs and the aahs of the congregation, we may hear the words; "Of such is the kingdom of God."

So let's look closely, let's listen carefully. This may be the moment when we may get a glimpse, just a glimpse, of the Kingdom of God. May it be so.