

Mark 4:26-34

4:26 He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground,

4:27 and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.

4:28 The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.

4:29 But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

4:30 He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?

4:31 It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth;

4:32 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."

4:33 With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it;

4:34 he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

I have a friend who works in human resources for a large corporate organization in Vancouver. One of his values is radical transparency and an open-door policy. So at least once a week, he walks out of his office and into the hallway into which all the executive offices lead and asks a question at the top of his voice – "Does anyone 'really know' what they are doing?"

Most of life's moments are not governed by rules or past patterns but by give it a try decisions and experimental actions, watching and waiting to see what will happen. Life is like jazz or improv. Certainty is an illusion.

So... Jesus, sits in a boat, the crowds have gathered, a people who are longing for social change, for the oppressive power of Roman rule and the Religious authorities to fall apart.

Mark's gospel recounts how they come to Jesus because he was promising a different 'kingdom'. One where there is justice for those who do not have money or work or a secure family system, one where those who have experienced marginalization have a voice.

Blessed are the poor
Blessed are the meek
Blessed are the hungry
Blessed are those longing for right relationship

Religion of the time had aligned with the oppressive political rule and the crowd were disillusioned. But here was someone among them, with imagination and with words of hope.

But Jesus' track record was not very good, already in Mark's gospel we have read how he was dismissed by the scholars of his day and an outcast from his family.

So the crowd are wondering, ok you are talking about a different Kingdom but HOW? WHEN?

And it is to address these questions that Jesus speaks out parables.

A parable is in the tradition of rabbinic *meshalim* short narrative fictions (these could be in the form of a riddle, a proverb or a sentence of the wise).

What made a parable unique is that it transferred a new way of seeing onto an ordinary situation.

When Jesus launched into a parable. The audience became deeply uncomfortable. Jesus subtly re-described reality.

Let's just pause a moment here and consider our own reality before we unpack these parables.

Most of us are frayed by the months of isolation, losses of connection and we are longing for some stability amid much disruption.

- This pandemic has aged us – we may feel that we have lost a year of living to the full.
- The pandemic has taken some of us into despair, and for others we have been caring for family and friends in their despair and struggle.

Also around us – as we listen - are friends and family who may have taken a harder hit – losing jobs, families split apart by the pressures of working, child rearing and living under one roof.

Small businesses, nonprofits, churches are looking at their budgets and wondering if they are going to make it.

There is what some would call 'discontinuous change' all around us. Continuous change is gradual, ongoing and expected change. Discontinuous change however is jolting and much more difficult.

And every change we face requires that we transition from what was to what is.
We have done a lot of transitioning back and forth during this time.

The Missional Leader, Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk

And here in this community there too has been change, the place we expected to stay the same has been hard hit by change – there have been hard goodbyes friends have died, a beloved choir director has departed. Finances have been knocked and our future, just what it will look like together, is uncertain.

We have done our best to make some directional decisions but just HOW and WHEN is still unknown.

Jesus leads us into parables drawn from the natural world that gives us an anchor to Live our Questions.

Echoed in the words of Reiner Maria Rilke, writing in the early 20th century:

“trust in Nature, in what is simple in Nature, in the small Things that hardly anyone sees and that can so suddenly become huge, immeasurable have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves”

So Jesus tells of a farmer who does the work before them to do.

- Planting seed.
- It is the work to simply cultivate an environment in which the seed will do what seeds are made to do, quite apart from our efforts.
- And then in a wondrous way - the growth takes place, by itself without the farmer knowing how.
- The farmer then does the work of **not doing anything** – only waiting, and curious watching.

Ched Myers writes: “The lesson of the unknowing farmer is that the means of the kingdom must never be compromised by attempting to manipulate the ends”

- We are called to do what we are able, what is in our capacity to do and then to let it go and not know or control the outcome.
- It is an invitation to try something and see what happens without being predictive.

And that friends is our transformation. You see change can happen all around us but the real invitation is the growing of openness and trust within us.

Richard Rohr writes in *The Wisdom Pattern – Order, Chaos and Reorder*

“Transformation happens out of the chaos – it is the freedom to let go instead of tightening our controls and certitude. Change happens, but transformation is always a process of letting go.”

And if we think that this is radicle?

The next parable – perhaps a better known one – seems even harder.

It is a vision of the unexpected.

Mustard Seeds – the dandelions and blackberry bushes of Palestine – a weed or invasive plant.

Now this parable definitely transfers a new way of seeing onto an ordinary situation:

- First of all why would a farmer sow seeds of weeds?
- Second why would a farmer want nests of birds in their fields?
- It seems crazy.

But if this is what the Kingdom of God is like, the dream of God’s justice, it operates with different logic.

The dream of God is a place where the least expected people, the least expected events are invited in, they are nourished and grow to be a blessing to others.

Those that seem unwelcome flourish and attract other “unwelcome Guests”

We have little certainty of what life, work, relationships and Christian community will be like as we transition once again over the next few months.

None of us do.

We are all asking the question: Does anyone know what they are doing?

But we have this...

We have the wisdom and example of Jesus
and we have the same Spirit that energized the Christ.

So will you join me in doing what is before us to do – together cultivate places of grace and possibility.

And then together sow some seeds – some ideas, some creative experiments, not knowing what will happen.

But practicing letting go, and watching and waiting to see what will happen.

And then welcoming the unexpected into our midst.

Prayer by Christine Valters Painter:

As the seasons unfold in their vibrant dance of change
may we hear the call from their pages
to blossom forth, to bear fruit,
to surrender and yield, to rest into mystery.

Let the journey of caterpillar to moth
teach you the path of transformation

Let the patience of mountains and singing of stones
give guidance for what it means to endure.

Let the rise and fall of the sun and moon
circling the blue-tiled sky
teach you about journeys to fullness
and to rest and release.

May Holy Wisdom be revealed in each season,
reading grace at every turn.