

SERMON

Mark 4:26-34 | The Rev. Lydia Gajdel | St. Paul & the Redeemer | Pentecost 3B | June 13, 2021

I am not a plant person. Don't get me wrong. I try. But the cold, hard truth of the matter is that I forget about them. For weeks at a time, my houseplants stare at me from the corners and cry out for water. And I wander around like they do not exist until they wither away to nothing. So, when I showed up to my first day of work as a Youth Minister and saw that my mother had sent me a plant, I was surprised. Opening the card, I found a note that read, "Good luck. I love you. You're going to kill it." I knew full well that she was joking, but from that day forward I took her card as a directly issued challenge. Not only was I was going to kill it in my job, but I was going to keep this freaking plant alive.

And keep it alive I did. For three years it lived in my office in Connecticut then, twig-like and fragile, I moved this plant to my new home last year placing it in the middle of my living room and all of a sudden something changed. It exploded. This plant that had been one stalk with a few feeble leaves turned into a massive tree-like palm. It turned a bright green I had never seen before. So, like anyone who has won a bet, I sent a picture of my success to my mother. A success that was absolutely not mine, but I took total credit for. To which she responded, "Wow. Couldn't have predicted this."

I couldn't help but think of this plant as I read our scripture lesson for today. We get two parables that seem pretty straight

forward at first read, but offer complex insight into the nature of the kingdom of God. Today we are being called to learn something from the wildness of life.

Chapter 4 in Mark's gospel, where our scripture lesson for today is found, begins with Jesus teaching about the kingdom of God. Jesus addresses his disciples saying, "To you has been given the secret to the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables." And so he sets out a series of parables, basically saying "the kingdom of God is sorta like ..." This is where our two parables come from. So, let's go through them.

First, the kingdom of God is sorta like the success of a useless farmer.

We are told the story of a farmer who spreads his seeds in the fields and basically walks away, leaving them to do what they do best, grow. This farmer has no fancy degree in agricultural engineering or even, it seems, a basic biology class under his belt. He doesn't know how it works, but he knows that if he watches and waits long enough the seeds will grow and the harvest will come. And that's just what happens. The earth produces of itself. Without guidance or help from the farmer, the earth takes the seeds and transforms them. Slowly nurturing the life within them until the fields are filled with grain. It is only then, after the mysteries of the earth have

taken place, that the farmer comes back to harvest.

The second parable: the kingdom of God is sorta like an invasive weed.

In this parable, Jesus compares the kingdom of God to the mustard seed, a seed that he describes as the smallest of all seeds on earth, yet it grows to be the greatest of all plants. So large and lush that birds make their homes among its branches. But context is key. In the time and place that Jesus was teaching, a mustard plant was, in fact, a common weed. Sturdy and pervasive, it took over fields and spread like wildfire. Farmers dedicated hours of manual labor to rid their land of this invasion. And yet, it persisted. Not only was the mustard plant annoying, it was also sort of scrappy, nothing like the great plant that Jesus describes. While a bird could technically build its home in the mustard plant, it would be ill protected. Jesus's listeners would have known all of this, probably getting a good laugh out of his comparison.

But we are left with some confusion. What could Jesus be trying to get across with a dud of a farmer and a major weed infestation?

The idea of the kingdom of God often comes with an image of grandness. The reign of God has come. Beauty and love and the Good have overcome sin and human depravity. The power of the creator and redeemer of the world has been made manifest and we are all to bow down at the thrown of the Lord. But just like the first century Jews who hoped for a messiah who would overthrow the political regime, yet received a poor carpenter, the kingdom of

God may come to us in a different form than expected.

Today in our parables we hear of a God who is dedicated to the process of building the kingdom, not just sitting in the grand thrones that come with it. A God who is interested in the growth as much as the plant itself. We hear of a kingdom that comes because it is in its very nature to do so, just like a seed that grows to grain. You see, the farmer in the first parable knows something about the kingdom that is often so hard for us to remember. We don't have to be in charge. God's got this, even when we can't or don't or won't see it. It might come slowly, growing day by day from the sprout to the grain, but the kingdom is near. The kingdom of God comes not because we work hard or even because we know what's happening. It is in God's very nature to draw near to us. Inching closer and closer. Sometimes imperceptible to the human eye, like trying to watch grain grow.

Since we cannot be in charge, change our destined life with God, we might get something different than what we plan for. Something that looks confusing or wild. Something that looks like a weed. In the parable of the mustard seed, we are told that the kingdom of God takes over, overpowering our best laid plans. Transforming the landscape of the field inch by inch, the mustard plant is depicted as the most glorious of shrubs, supporting life and flourishing in ways unexpected. The reign of God will overcome us and provide in ways unimaginable.

To think about the kingdom of God like this is to bask in the wildness of God's love for us. There is something sacred in God's constant pursuit of us, even when we can't

or won't recognize it. Sacred in the confusion of what it means to be loved by God. Sacred in the fact that we do nothing to earn the coming of the kingdom and yet we are overpowered by it.

But today's scripture also presents a challenge to us. Because on many days the coming of the kingdom couldn't feel farther away. In a world where politics seem to be more important than people, racism and violence are interwoven into the cloth of our society, and we are slowly but surely creeping our way out from under the plague that has ravaged our world, we are not a people practiced in seeking the kingdom. In fact, it often feels like we run from it. Which is why we are taught how to recognize it. Jesus gives us these parables, these the kingdom is sorta like dot dot dot stories, so that we may pay better attention to our world and know that God is present in it, even in the things we don't necessarily think look like God.

When I was working as a Youth Minister, part of my job was leading the annual mission trip. Every year we would pile into vans and make our way to a new place in search for God at work in the world. These trips were always framed as a way for our youth to go out into the world and find God. But God's work isn't always so obvious.

It was late, almost time for bed checks. As I walked into the common room of our tiny hotel in the middle of West Virginia, I thought I was about to walk into chaos. Loud music and games. High schoolers goofing around like they had every night before. What I found was ten kids laying on the floor talking. Talking about hard things. Complex things. About their experiences of

growing up in a town of great privilege and the pressures that come with it. About feeling the weight of expectations on their shoulders and the consequences of carrying it. As I joined my kids on the floor, I was reminded that the kingdom of God is sorta like a pile of high schoolers quietly loving each other. The kingdom of God doesn't always come as we expect.

As we go out into the world, may we all find the sacred in the wildness of life. May we be reminded of God's constant drawing nearer to us. And may we be present to the ways in which the love of God that surpasses all understanding ushers in the reign of the kingdom.

Amen.