

Mysterious Growth of the Kingdom
Mark 4:26-34
June 20, 2021

Those of you who followed the popular television show, **Mad Men**, and the compelling story of Don Draper and the Madison Avenue advertising firm, Sterling, Cooper, Draper, Pryce, will have sympathized with the characters' struggles to find happiness. (The final scene of season five saw Don sitting at a bar looking forlorn and alone. The Nancy Sinatra lyrics play over the scene: *You only live twice...one life for yourself and one for your dreams*. He appears to have everything life offers in spades, but he feels unsatisfied. As his friend Peggy said to him: *You really have no idea when things are good, do you?* In spite of all the business and material success, Don seems to live with a huge hole inside that neither success in business, marriage or life seems to fill.

One of Don's partners in the firm, the young Pete, speaks a telling line about the human condition. He ruminates about his life in the New York suburbs; he has a lovely wife and baby, a successful partnership in the firm with all the material benefits this brings, and yet, and yet. He voices his yearnings for more: **He realized that his life with his family was some temporary bandage on a permanent wound.** What a sad, dispiriting line from someone so blessed with love and apparent success.

If this series offers us insight into the 1960's soul when life seems on the surface optimistic, forward looking and full of promise, surely it speaks to our hidden fears and yearnings today. With what temporary bandages do we cover over our inner angst? What holes in our soul do we attempt to fill? And with what? What does this mysterious, kingdom of God have to say to our human dilemma and to the search for meaning amid disappointment that is portrayed in **Mad Men**?

Jesus taught in parables and stories. Parables are not fables. They are not clever stories to offer a moral teaching. A parable is intended to disrupt our way of thinking. It wants to turn on its head any ideas that we take for granted. Fables seek to teach a moral lesson. A parable on the other hand wants to confront us with a surprising new twist on truth. When a truth is difficult to believe or even hear, a

parable comes along to help move us forward. One of the preachers I used to listen to in Cambridge, England, R.T. France, in his commentary on Matthew says this about Jesus' use of parables: (they) **remains elusive, challenging, and unsettling, leaving his audience in a dilemma to what response they should make. (p.530)**

Jesus describes the kingdom of God in parables probably because he knows that his audience is not ready to accept the startling interpretation of Israel's Messiah that he brings to the table. His Gospel represents an upside-down world to them. Indeed, these word pictures of everyday scenes, such as a farmer sowing seed, seek to break through their settled ideas of the kingdom. And so, parables act like narrative time bombs, Eugene Peterson says. **You hear them-tick-wonder what it means-tick-think maybe we've got it-tick-and then you walk away-and all of a sudden, the truth that it has tried to convey strikes home-boom!**

Our gospel today offers two parables about seed. What is God's kingdom like? It's like a man who throws seed down in the field. He scatters the seed indiscriminately. Then he goes home and the regular rhythm of day and night follows. Without him knowing how it happens, the seed grows and in time is ready for harvest. In other words, like the seed, the growth of the kingdom is hidden, mysterious, and notice, out of our control. The farmer doesn't make the seed grow; nor is it in our power to make God's kingdom grow. At harvest, here a sign of the final judgement, the farmer takes his sickle into the field, cuts down the grain, and gathers the harvest. This is a bold picture of the growth of God's kingdom through to the end of the age. What does this parable teach us? What do Mark's audience learn? What do we learn?

Jesus' series of seed parables about the kingdom of God teaches us that God's rule is **hidden, indirect, surprising and not easily understood**. All these seed parables tell us that the kingdom is near, as Jesus said from the outset of his preaching, and breaks mysteriously into our settled, rational, everyday world.

If that wasn't enough to encourage us in our ministry as Christian communities, Mark provides another parable, this time of a mustard

seed. The reign of God is like a mustard seed, he says, a tiny seed that is sown in the ground. Jesus here is comparing God's secret, invisible kingdom to the sowing of a mustard seed. Mark refers us back to the prophet Daniel who spoke of a great tree that would shelter animals and provide nesting for the birds. (Daniel 4:11,12) Daniel tells the king of Babylon that the king is the tree that has grown so big and powerful. But, the vision also tells him that his power will soon be taken away and a new kingdom will supplant his. As of course will happen with the rise of the Persian Empire (559 BC to 331 BC (Daniel 4:24ff).

Jesus is conveying the idea how, from its insignificant beginning as a tiny seed, God's kingdom, grows into a welcoming home. The mustard bush grows and the birds find it a happy place to nest.

Jesus, and later the Gospel writers, are drawing from the Ezekiel text we read this morning. As with so many of Israel's prophets, Ezekiel, a contemporary of Daniel, paints a portrait of the world opening up in the future. Writing from his home as an exile in Babylon, a time when things look pretty hopeless, Ezekiel provides a vivid metaphor of what God is about to bring about in the life of Israel and the world. God is going to plant a tiny sprig from the cedar tree on the mountain heights of Israel. It's going to grow into a lofty tree and bear fruit. And under the shade of its branches every kind of bird will live and nest. This word-picture in both Ezekiel, Daniel, envisions the day when God's sovereign and life-giving power will embrace the whole world. God's reign will triumph in spite of appearances.

It is images like this one that Jesus and the New Testament writers draw on for their teaching on the in-breaking of God's kingdom. It would have been great encouragement to the early Christians who were a struggling minority within the Roman Empire.

The other important lesson for us in these parables is an important one for us today. We live on the margins of society. We have little influence or control over the way things unfold. In this marginal place we occupy it's important to remember that the growth of the kingdom of God is not in our control. Our only responsibility is to sow the seed, watch it grow and be prepared to nurture it. This message of grace and love found in Jesus does have the power to transform lives. It's

on this truth alone, and of course that God's Spirit is working through us, that keeps us moving forward.

This kingdom embraces everyone-rich, poor, educated or not, whatever colour, religion, or culture. Moreover, these parables remind us that God's kingdom, centered in Jesus' life, death and resurrection, grows to harvest, even when we just don't understand how.

This reminds me of a co-worker at IBM where I worked as a student in college. Let's call him Bob! Bob was my supervisor in the office. I can still see Bob on Monday morning bragging about his wild drinking weekend. He probably did this to rile me. But he knew where I stood and that I was a Christian. Several years later I was at Peoples Church in Toronto for some event and who is there but Bob. I couldn't believe my eyes. There was Bob carry a huge bible looking like he was part of the scene. I asked him what happened. My recollection is that his response was something like: I found Christ, or Christ found me. God works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform.

For many today, like Bob when I first met him, this Gospel undoubtedly sounds odd, even off-putting. But the parables remind us that, in spite of our insignificance in society, our apparent weakness, our apparent off beat message, this kingdom message grows as we sow. It wins peoples' hearts, even people you would least expect, like Bob!

My sense is that the Don Drapers and Pete's of this world need this message of God's reign and ultimate triumph. Like so many people we know and meet, whose lives appear rather empty of meaning and purpose, often breathtakingly broken, the Gospel message of God's love can be like cooling water in a thirsty land. Like Pete in the **Mad Men** series, lots of us have bandaged over our profound wounds and inner disquiet. There are a host of bandages we employ.

And since we have this amazing message of hope, love and healing, surely we ought to share it with our neighbour. I know we in the church often feel somewhat feeble and even tongue-tied; so much so that we have a serious lack of confidence. May this message of these parables encourage us in our Christian life. May they remind us that

the kingdom continues to grow, however hidden, and mysterious. Often outside our control even. Let's keep sowing the seed, the amazing good news.. People need it's life-giving, healing powers.

Amen