

Of Seeds, Parables and the Kingdom of God
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
June 14, 2009
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Scripture: Mark 4:26-34

In the United Kingdom, there is a new voice for God.

His name is Peter Rollins. He runs an organization called Ikon, which is part of what is called the Emergent Church movement. Essentially, the Emergent Church movement is interested in revitalizing Christianity. To do so, it has thrown out traditional views of how to be church and started over, often with some fairly unorthodox ways of worshipping God and being a family of faith.

Many think of the Emergent Church movement as the leading edge of the future of the church. If that is true, Peter Rollins and Ikon are on the edge of the edge. They conduct what they call “anarchic experiments.” For example, they study atheism during Lent. They meet in pubs and worship through music and poetry ... all in an effort to get people to begin again with their faith, to think deeply and even dangerously about what they believe ... all as a way of drawing closer to God.

“Too much of Christianity wants God to come down and tell us what the truth is,” says Rollins, an Irishman who holds degrees in religion and philosophy. “We try to disrupt people’s understanding of Christianity and get them to think differently.”

Well, that sounds pretty radical, you might say, pretty risky. After all, look at the success of all the churches that paint God in bold black and white tones and spoon feed it to their members in safe, small mouthfuls for easy digestion. Or how other huge churches say that what God wants most is for us to be – individually – our best selves. Never mind the poor, the oppressed, the downtrodden.

What some are doing to shake up the church may be radical, yes, perhaps. Or maybe, just maybe, even in a small way, it is an imitation of Christ.

We know Christ through what he did and what he said.

To be sure, what Christ did, his actions, were bold and unambiguous. He shunned the traditional religious authorities of his day and, instead, hung out with all sorts of

questionable characters, believing they were the ones who needed a word from God the most. If there had been pubs in days, Christ might have been there, too.

But when Jesus spoke, he pushed his followers to think about God in radical ways and he pushed hard. He did this by telling stories, or parables, and Jesus' stories could be real head-scratchers.

Nowhere is this more clear than in the gospel of Mark, which is the focus of study in the Red Bus Adult Sunday school class this summer. As we discussed in the class last week, we might even think about Jesus' parables as riddles. They used every-day scenarios and earthy, familiar things – as in today's reading from the lectionary where Mark recounts two parables about seeds.

These were very familiar things to Jesus' listeners. But the familiarity of the language and the examples Christ used in his metaphors could trip you up, if you weren't thinking, because his parables did not draw a straight line of earthly logic from point A to point B.

The word parable comes from the same Greek word as another word. We might remember it from geometry class ... parabola. Remember parabolas? I do because I specifically recall failing a test about them.

A parabola "is the intersection of a right circular conical surface and a plane parallel to a generating straight line of that surface. Given a point and a line that lie in a plane, the locus of points in that plane that are equidistant to them is a parabola."¹

No wonder I failed the test.

In plain English, a parabola looks like an arch – think of the great arch in St. Louis. It connects two points on the ground but – rather than going directly across the ground – it soars up and then down. Think of a pop fly as opposed to a line drive.

Parables followed the arc of parabolas. In the South, we might say that through his parables Jesus went around his elbow to get to his thumb. They moved the listener from one point of understanding to another, but they didn't take a direct-line approach.

If there had been Powerpoint in Jesus' day, he would not have reduced his teaching about the Kingdom of God to a couple of bullet points and a bar chart. He would have turned off the laptop and told a story, as he did in the verses from Mark that we a moment ago.

¹ Wikipedia

What is the Kingdom of God like, Jesus asks rhetorically?

As for us, we might begin with the question of what is the Kingdom of God – what does Jesus mean by that?

The phrase “the kingdom of God” and others like it appear throughout both testaments. In some books, it points to a future event, the coming or “breaking in” of God’s final design for the world. Some of our brothers and sisters in other faith traditions look for the “end times” when some will be taken up into heaven in an event such as the rapture.

Others read how Jesus described the Kingdom of God and come to different conclusions. They say that Jesus was saying that his very arrival in the world had marked the beginning of the Kingdom of God, that the kingdom can and should be realized in his presence and through his teachings and sayings. If you like to astound your friends at parties, you can call this “realized eschatology.” Thus, liberal Protestant Christians see Jesus’ teaching as a social gospel that gives us clear designs for how society should operate.

Before he gets to today’s parables in the gospel of Mark, Jesus hits the ground running. Mark offers no long, drawn-out narrative of Jesus’ birth. By the end of the first chapter, Jesus has already healed many of unclean spirits, leprosy and fevers. By the end of the second chapter, he has rankled the traditional church authorities by eating with a tax collector, encouraging his followers and redefining the purpose of the Sabbath. As we have been saying in Sunday school, Jesus is in a hurry to get people to think differently about what God is doing in the world, and it shows.

But in the verses from the fourth chapter, Jesus slows down a bit. He acts less in this chapter and talks more and he speaks through parables.

“The Kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground” he says. The seed sprouts and grows whether the gardener is sleeping or working and the gardener does not know how.

Here Jesus seems to be saying, at least in part, that the arrival of the Kingdom of God is beyond our thinking and doing, beyond those of us who seek to micro-manage, who think that it won’t happen unless we do it, who want to keep a white-knuckled grip on the reins of the world.

Action in the world is needed. Christ makes that clear through his own actions. But in this parable of the seed, Christ gently reminds us that the God who created the world and all that is in it is still sovereign over it all.

As I have been living with that parable over the last few weeks, we at Caldwell have had several important meetings aimed at focusing our efforts to, as the prophet Micah says, “do justice.”

Justice, you may remember, is a key theme for the entire church this year. We want to round out our work in the world in God’s name, to complement all the mission work we are doing to alleviate hunger, provide shelter for the homeless, support our schools and build a more global vision. Through our efforts to “do justice”, we hope to advocate for those who are voice-less and power-less, to agitate where necessary to remind those who hold the secular power in our city wherever structural or systemic inequities and disadvantages exist.

In these conversations, we have found ourselves trying to define further the difference between justice and mission. Mission work, I have said, is aimed at the symptoms of our social ills while justice efforts are aimed more directly at the illnesses themselves. Others have shared their perspectives. It’s a great conversation to have – and a necessary one so that we can focus and differentiate our efforts.

But I’ve also chuckled to myself a couple of times. In the parable of the seed and the gardener, Jesus says the seed, the Kingdom of God, sprouts and the gardener “does not know how.” Perhaps Jesus might, at once, encourage our examination of the mission and justice and prod us into action while, at the same time, reminding us that God blesses and sustains on our work ... and goes ahead of us to prepare a way, regardless.

In the second parable, which Jesus seems to tell simply to hammer home his point, Jesus says the Kingdom of God is like the smallest seed on earth that, when sown, becomes the greatest of all shrubs. When we discussed this parable in Sunday school, we had to admit that this parable was clearly for a mid-eastern audience, where things like mustard bushes and fig trees are more common and made more sense as everyday symbols of the Kingdom of God.

Not many of us has ever seen a mustard seed. Instead, I could point you all to the magnificent vegetable plants in our garden that have already grown to be three-feet high. But we planted small seedlings – not seeds - to get a head start, so the Caldwell garden wouldn’t quite be a fair analogy.

I did think of something else, though. I thought of the summer enrichment camp that we are hosting in partnership with Children Come 1st this summer. Some of the CC1st leaders and families are with us this morning. We welcome them warmly and will ask for God's blessings on the camp a little later on in the service.

The idea for the camp came up late in the spring. None of us has a lot of experience in building a summer camp from scratch. The organizers had lots of hope but few resources. It truly is a leap of faith.

We are learning as we go. The leaders of Children Come 1st have big dreams that require a lot of work and organization and commitment to fulfill. With just a few volunteers from Caldwell, they have spiffed up and brought back to life our old building next door. They have planned daily schedules full of activities, field trips, clubs and art projects.

Tomorrow morning, children will show up for camp, entrusted to us by their parents who simply need a safe and enriching place for their kids to be while they are at work. Clint Patton, the camp director, will be there at 7:30 with a lot of love and a pot of grits to fill their stomachs.

I pray that God's love, as shown through the love and support of the congregation, showers this little mustard seed that it might put forth large branches to provide shelter and safety, learning and growth to those who need it.

And if we think for a second that the children of our city don't really need another summer camp, we can ask ourselves about the childhoods of the two teenagers who murdered Tatiana Petty's father a week ago today. We can ask ourselves, what might have made a difference in their lives?

That's the thing about parables, Jesus said. It takes the eyes of faith to see their real meaning and sometimes we look through the eyes of the world instead. Jesus told his disciples that they could see glimpses of the kingdom of God all around them in their every-day comings and goings, even in a mustard plant.

Others may see only a mustard plant. But those with the gift of faith see the hope and the promise of what God has made possible – even our salvation – not through our own works but through the grace of our lord Jesus Christ.

In closing, I am reminded of a little plant at our house.

To be perfectly clear, Kelly is the gardener at our house. Our yard is adorned with a half dozen types of roses, Peonies and other seasonal flowers, flowering shrubs and more. She is the creative force and the nurturing hand. My skills go as far as digging holes and cutting the grass.

But there is this one little project I have. We live on the corner and there is a street sign there. Since we moved in, a shrub of some sort, no doubt the product of a wayward seed, has been trying its hardest to climb up the pole that holds the street sign.

The city maintenance people don't look kindly on it. If it gets too far up the pole and threatens to obscure the sign, they come by and whack it off. But they never get it at its roots and before long it is climbing back up the pole. This year, I've even trimmed it a bit so that it fills out down low and doesn't interfere with drivers' ability to read the street sign. This mighty little bush of unknown species covers the cold metal sign post nicely.

The sign at the top of post where it grows is a "Yield" sign, asking drivers to slow down and look out as they go through the intersection. Perhaps that was Jesus' point in telling parables. Yield, slow down, look at the world and where God is in it differently and you may be surprised by a glimpse of the kingdom of God in all of its promise and hope and potential.

To God be the Glory. Amen.