

# Harvest to Come

## Mark 4:26-34

A man lived in Nashville who had some scruffy weeds in his yard. He would cut them back to the ground in January and in March, expecting that to be the end of them. Yet by May, from these little brown stumps came green shoots, and by midsummer they were growing tall again. He stood in awe of this process—from stumps in the ground to full grown bushes in July! It is this kind of dynamic power and vitality that Jesus described in these parables in today's text. **Nibs Stroupe**

Jesus explained in our reading about the kingdom of God. The first parable compared the kingdom to a feature of plants that is familiar to any gardener or farmer. The gardener can put the seed in the ground but cannot really do anything about its growing. In fact, the gardener has so little to do with making the seed grow that in the parable the gardener sleeps through the process of sprouting and maturation. The kingdom of God is like a sleeping gardener. Or perhaps the kingdom is like a gardener who slept through the growing season but wakes up in time for the harvest. In case we did not quite get the message with this parable, Jesus offers us a second one. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which though the smallest of all seeds, grows into a bush so large and lush that birds can make nests in its shade.

The imagery reminds us of grace. This is such a central biblical and Christian idea, and yet it remains so difficult to really accept or believe. Intimacy with Christ grows in us as certainly and as effortlessly as seeds

grow. We have so little to do with Christ's nearness to us that we can just go to sleep. In fact it might be better if we did sleep through the whole thing, snug and safe, resting like babies in our mothers' arms. This trust so deep that we can sleep without anxiety is much more useful to us than fussing over the little seed: dousing it with pesticide, repotting it, clucking anxiously over the amount of sun it has. The kingdom is like this sleepy, restful trust. It is not like the frenetic busyness of works righteousness, and it is not like the anxious attachment to particular moral or doctrinal positions, defending which we gladly expend all our energy. Being busy and dogmatic makes a lot of sense to us. It fits with our normal way of being human. We achieve all sorts of goods by working hard and committing ourselves to our values: well run offices, good grades, better schools, the politicians of our choice, slim figures, neatly trimmed lawns, and so on. These are mostly reasonable things, and certainly nothing useful would happen if we did not work for it or if we remained indifferent to moral and political issues. It is just that this way of operating is not like the kingdom of God. Our difficulty arises in confusing the way of the kingdom with our ordinary way of doing things. Jesus is calling us to a very different way of being with ourselves, with one another, with the divine, by asking us to recognize that spiritual growth and intimacy with God arises as naturally as seeds growing. The harvest will come without us having to work for it, because God adores us and it is this love that is the power of growth. It is this love that transforms the tiniest and most impotent-looking seed into a lush bush that gives rest and shade to the singing birds, just as it transforms our tiny, distorted awareness of God into a magnificent radiance in which we ourselves and all the creatures we meet can rest.

This text gives us familiar images that seduce us with the expectation of some simple, perhaps even pat, message: the sort one might find painted on china at Stuckey's, along with pictures of kittens or flowering plants. But the parable moves from some tame little image to a strange, incomprehensible resemblance to the central symbol and urgency of Jesus' teaching ministry.

### **Wendy Farley**

Jesus' comparison of the kingdom of God to a mustard seed is, plain and simple, about the kingdom that provides saving space way beyond our imagining. The parable is not about us, but about the grace of God; and yet we "overhear" in these stories so much about what pertains to human reception of the good news of salvation. There are clues in the plant that grows so large from so small a seed. We marvel that birds come to nest in the shade of this spacious dwelling. So shall the reign of God be. We, like the farmer, do not understand how the sprouting and the growing of such a reality take place. Yet it becomes a harvest of life, and the tree from the seed spreads out branches to be a place of rest and song and abundance.

We suspect that the early Christian communities were often as puzzled by this parabolic presentation of the kingdom as we are. These two parables that Mark stitches together have generated many theological interpretations over the centuries. Does the kingdom come slowly, over the long haul? Should we understand the harvest in due season as the future event of the end times? Are we to believe that God is in control of growth and harvest, despite the evidences of the way the world is?

What strikes many scholars is how religious believers and certain strands of Christian study have stressed that the kingdom of God comes primarily in judgment of the world's wickedness. But here there is no hint of God's anger, nor any suggestion of the kingdom of God coming with an apocalyptic

ending in which everyone will get what is coming to them. Rather the mystery of the kingdom is that it is here and not here. It is already being shown in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, while yet hidden.

These are hope-filled parables. God will not fail to fulfill the promise of salvation. It is already coming to be in this world—like the seed sown in the earth, or the remarkable growth of the tree from the mustard seed, silently but powerfully coming to be. At the same time the mystery and the reality of the saving realm and reign of God continue to be beyond every human reality we know. The saving act of God in Jesus Christ remains both revealed and veiled to us in this life, just as it remained so for the first Christian communities. Like the disciples and like the early church, we are caught between understanding and misunderstanding. To follow Jesus, this teller of parables, is to become alive to all the paradoxes and the tensions of his life and death: goodness appears in human form, and human powers are threatened; yet death leads to life. We struggle to understand while yet standing under the signs of God's offer of life.

Jesus told so many parables because he is the very parable of God in human flesh. This is the extraordinary under the signs and words of the ordinary. So the hope is in the question: "What is God's kingdom like? To what shall we compare it?" No one answer will ever exhaust the meaning of this question, but the pulse of Jesus' words, deeds, death, and resurrection point to the secret hid from a distracted, hopeless world. This pulse is the heartbeat of God, whose rule and reign is coming with the terrible speed of mercy. **Don E. Saliers**

The passage ends by saying that Jesus spoke the word only in parables to the crowd, "as they were able to hear it," but that he explained everything to the disciples. However if we are tempted to think that the disciples received

an inside track that saved them from the pain and confusion of the gospel, the next story corrects us of that thought. As soon as we learn that everything was explained in private to the disciples, we learn how useful this was to them. They were on the boat; a storm came up; they were terrified. On the verge of drowning, they woke up Jesus (sleeping, like the gardener, through the tumult). He could not understand why they were afraid. "Have you no faith?!?!?" he asked them. To Jesus, their fear was incomprehensible; to them, Jesus' calm was incomprehensible.

It is interesting to observe how frustrated Jesus got in these stories. He was trying to convey some fantastically good news as clearly as possible, in healing, in parables, in private explanations, in his (odd, even offensive) choice of companions. But the disciples, the crowd, and 2,000 years of Christians find whatever he was trying so hard to give us incredibly hard to receive. Perhaps these passages are best left unexplained. Perhaps we should simply let them vibrate in their strangeness so that our habituated patterns of understanding and feeling begin to loosen enough to allow something of Jesus' strange and wonderful news to break into us. **Wendy Farley**

Remember, this parable is not so much about us and what we do, as about the grace of God which grows the seeds of faith in us, matures us and give a harvest that can be shared with all. Let us be available to this kind of faith in our lives. Let us be a part of the Kingdom of God.

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).