

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

There are two things that we know about Jesus that are beyond historical doubt, one is that he was crucified and the other is that he taught in parables. His parables are not only the primary revelation of the Kingdom of God, but he himself is the primary revelation of God among us.¹ And through the parables taught to us by Jesus Christ along with Jesus Christ himself we have a glimpse into God and God's Kingdom in a way in which we can only consider and appreciate through our human context and through our faith in the promise that we will see clearly at the time of our resurrection.

Today in our Gospel text we hear two simple parables that tell us that somebody scattered seeds and they grew...and what we are being taught about these seeds is extremely emblematic of the One teaching us as well as the One who sent the teacher. And the most important lesson one can learn about parables comes from the teacher himself who said earlier in this chapter,

‘Let anyone with ears to hear listen!’ (Mark 4:9)

So, what is it about these seeds we are being taught?

From these parables concerning seeds, Jesus is attempting to reveal for us, His own experience of God in a way or in a context the people of that time and people today can grasp and somewhat understand.² Jesus does this because for us and from our context, the divine mystery cannot be solved.³

There is one thing that I have come to understand and totally love about parables, and that is, understanding them is not a completed act, it is an ongoing action or an ongoing study that changes and grows as our experience and context changes and grows. In our consideration of parables and their lure of perpetual study, consider the words St. Paul wrote to the Galatians:

⁹ So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. (Galatians 6:9)

Yes, parables are a constant learning experience because they are very puzzling at times, there is however one constant within the parables and that is: God and God's Kingdom do not change, even as our context, our perspective and our interpretation of God and the Kingdom changes, God and God's promise of grace and life revealed in the parables are a constant, never ending and never changing. While St. Paul may say that we walk by faith not by sight and I would agree whole heartedly, but I would add that we learn by faith as well.

As we look at these very brief parables we are called and we are challenged to think beyond the words of the parables, as well as, think beyond our concrete understanding of the things mentioned in them and think in terms of faith, think in terms of metaphor and to think beyond the image of a seed, think of something more than just a plant as we see and understand them to be...think by faith and not what we know.

¹ Hultgren, Arlund J., *The Parables of Jesus, A Commentary*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000. Chapter 1, The Parables of Jesus: An Introduction, page 1

² Bowman Thurston, Bonnie, *Preaching Mark*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002. Chapter Three, “The Parables: The Substance of Jesus’ Message, page 57.

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-11-2/commentary-on-mark-426-34-6> Commentary by C. Clifton Black, Otto A. Piper Professor of Biblical Theology, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ

In today's Gospel lesson we have two separate parables both dealing with seeds. From both parables, we can parse out the details and claim that certain parts represent God and how we think God works. We can debate the details about how the parables presented to us today show us how God is active in bringing the divine realm to full bloom or fruition.⁴ When we have finished, have we then simply confined God to our understanding or have we left room for God's infinite grace...and does that grace only work through our understanding and conclusions? Do the parables divide us from the world and from our enemies or can we find God's grace or even God himself in our enemies? Have the parables reminded us that if we cannot find grace for others than we deny God's grace for ourselves.⁵

I have come to view the parables as seeds that bear fruit and feed the souls of all with ears to listen, as we journey through our lives. And as we journey, we come back to these stories, like the very birds mentioned and we find food for our souls in the metaphors that reveal the Good News of God's grace and love...not just for ME but for all. I do however, want to look closer at the seeds themselves because this is truly where I find the mystery of God as well as the Good News for us today.

In the second parable mentioned today Jesus is teaching us about the mustard seed, a common garden weed that grows and produces a great shrub. Now to be totally honest, I wouldn't know a mustard shrub or bush if I tripped and fell into it so I will take Jesus's word that it turns out to be a huge bush that birds can nest in. I have on the other hand seen a mustard seed and they are very tiny, just a bit bigger than the size of a period on a printed page. For me, seeds of any kind are miracles among us, right in our midst. As a kid and even now, I wonder what makes something grow when it is placed in the dirt? Oh, sure we can water it and fertilize it, we know all about germination, but with no human agency at all, what gets the ball rolling within a seed. What makes a seed sprout and shoot out of dirt and where does all the stalk, the leaves, the flower, or the fruit come from, is it all in that little seed? I used to wonder if there was a little manufacturing plant inside that seed I planted. As a kid I got to thinking that if I planted a penny in the ground and watered it, would the penny grow money, would it sprout and grow dollar bills?! For any wondering...no, it doesn't work, I tried.

Scholars will tell you that:

Before you can analyze anything, you need to know the context. That's just a fact. Contextual data helps informed analysts make better decisions by providing the necessary background information and understanding of underlying trends.

A wrong decision can mean the difference between success and failure, and good data is essential to making the right choice, which is why it's such an important aspect. Understanding context is always the first step to the ultimate goal.⁶

Here is where I think this parable might annoy us, we view this parable through our human context of success and failure. In other words, we want OUR seeds, of any kind, to sprout and

⁴ Van Harn, Roger E. *The Lectionary Commentary Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, The Third Readings: Gospels*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001. The commentary based on the appointed Gospel reading for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, Gospel lesson: Mark 4:26-34, pages 202-206.

⁵ This idea of seeing God in our enemies is from Thomas Merton. This quote of Merton's is from a resource, *Maverick Mark, The Untamed Gospel*. Bonnie B. Thurston, Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2013. Chapter 3, "Mark and Economic Justice" page 32.

⁶ <https://brand24.com/blog/context-analysis/>

grow, to be healthy and vibrant, and to bear the fruit of success. We work hard to put all the right pieces in play to reach the ultimate goal for our seeds. We study and analyze trends and statistics in order to strive to be the biggest, the best, the most successful, or the winner. From the information gathered, we then set up marketing campaigns and strategic plans and sequenced steps and goals that will drive ourselves or push ourselves to our ultimate goal of success. Unfortunately, we parse out this parable, like any parable, as a way to successfully “grow” our faith, or make our faith better than the others...but what does a successful faith look like? Is one faith better than another? Is my faith as an ordained pastor better than a lay person’s faith? How would we go about measuring our faith? Does knowledge and understanding about seeds and these parables give someone a scholarly or theological advantage about faith and about God?

All the contextual data we can gather about this parable or the seeds themselves will not really tell us how the seed grows, nor could all the contextual data improve our faith nor explain God or God’s kingdom any better. The seed grows secretly, telling us of “the mystery of the kingdom of God.” We also hear that the seed is scattered, ignored, then it “blasts off” (the Greek term for sprout is *βλαστός blastoes*) the seed blasts or sprouts and “grows.” But how? The sower has no idea and does nothing but sleep.⁷

The seed is planted in the earth and it automatically sprouts and bears fruit without any human effort or agency. From the parables we learn that all our scholarly and theological strategizing comes down to a very simple and elementary understanding...the growth of the seed like our faith is in and from God’s hand. Furthermore, we learn that great things can come from insignificant beginnings. Like the seeds that sprout and grow, we truly don’t know where our faith comes from, we just know we believe.

The Good News from these parables is that God’s kingdom, which means the renewal of ALL things, is a pure gift. We do nothing to persuade or coax its coming into being, we just simply pray for it to sprout and grow...and it does!

As we pray as the Lord has taught us, we pray for God’s Kingdom to come. May we too look beyond the words, as we have done with parables before us today, and understand that when we beseech God in the very words Jesus has taught us, we pray that God’s kingdom, like the seeds, comes of itself without our prayer. Yet we pray that it may come to us, that is, that it may prevail among us and with us, so that we may be a part of those among whom his name is hallowed and his kingdom flourishes.⁸

I want to emphasize something about this petition of the Lord’s Prayer. When we pray this prayer, be it in worship, at the close of our meetings, in private, in public or at public events, we pray that God’s Kingdom may come to us, that is, that it may prevail among us and with us...the “us” mentioned is all of us in here and all the “us” out there as well...we pray that God’s Kingdom comes to all human kind.

⁷ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-11-2/commentary-on-mark-426-34-6> Commentary by C. Clifton Black, Otto A. Piper Professor of Biblical Theology, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ

⁸ Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), “The Large Catechism, The Lord’s Prayer,” The Second Petition. Par 50, page 446.

From the parables Jesus teaches us today, we learn that seed is scattered, it sprouts, and it bears fruit all on its own. In these seed parables we learn that God's kingdom comes on its own, without our involvement or contribution, even without our prayer. Luther makes a point when explaining infant Baptism in the Large Catechism that is like the seed parables:

I myself, and all who are baptized, must say before God: "I come here in my faith and in the faith of others, nevertheless I cannot build on the fact that I believe and many people are praying for me. Instead, I build on this, that it is your Word and command." In the same way I go to the Sacrament [of the Altar] not on the strength of my own faith, but on the strength of Christ's Word. I may be strong or weak; I leave that for God to decide. This I know, however—that God has commanded me to go, eat, and drink, etc., and that God gives me his body and blood; he will not lie or deceive me.⁹

The Good News for us is that God's Kingdom comes and renews us not on the strength of our own faith, but on the strength of the seed of Christ's Holy Word that has been planted in all of us. So too may God's Word be scattered, and without our interference or our agency, may the seed of God's Word, sprout and renew all who have ears to listen.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁹ Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, *The Book of Concord: the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000. "The Large Catechism" Infant Baptism. Page 463-462, par. 56