

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Today we continue our 8-week study on Mark's gospel. Last week, we heard about two different reactions to Jesus' message both from his family and the scribes. Between last week and today's readings, Jesus began to tell parables about the kingdom or reign of God. So far, he's told the famous parable about a Sower spreading seed onto different types of soil, and he followed that up with some comments about the revelation of Jesus' ministry being like a lamp being put on a lampstand instead of under a bushel basket. Today, we have another pair of parables to explore. Instead of reactions by people to Jesus, we're exploring two parables by Jesus meant to help us ponder the reign of God.

Yet, before we dive into the parables, let's talk about this unique genera. Parables are nothing new or exclusive to the Christian Scriptures. Rabbinic Judaism used parables, and they drew on even earlier Near Eastern literature. Functionally, parables, as Rev. Dr. David Lose puts it, "are useful when the truth you want to share is difficult – whether difficult to hear, comprehend, or believe. Jesus describes the coming Kingdom of God in parables because he knows the reality it introduces is unexpected and that his hearers can't really take it in all at once.

Parables, as Eugene Peterson has said, are in this sense like narrative time bombs. You hear them – tick – wonder about them – tick – think maybe you've got it – tick – and then as you walk away – tick – or over the course

of the next day or so – tick – and all of the sudden the truth Jesus meant to convey strikes home – boom! – almost overwhelming you with its implications.”¹ Knowing that we might not get this all figured out today, let’s explore today’s two parables knowing they may be filled with difficult truths. The first parable is unique to Mark’s gospel – that is, no other gospel has a similar version. In the parable, the seed that was scattered unexpectedly grows, and Jesus says that this is a representation of God’s reign. While it’s hard to pin down the exact meanings of this parable, it might be about our complete inability to control the growth of God’s reign. Like the Sower, we can sow seeds of love, but we don’t know how they will land or which ones will grow. That’s the mystery brought about by the Spirit. However, what we can know is what a good harvest looks like when love, justice, and peace are multiplied.

This is a humbling parable for those in the church and who work to support the reign of God among us. The reality is that we cannot dictate whether the seeds we sow will grow. We cannot control if someone will follow in supporting God’s reign. All that we can do is sow seeds of God’s love, justice, and peace. Which ones will grow and how large they’ll grow is a mystery and is the Spirit’s responsibility. // This parable reminds us that we are not in complete control. Instead, we are partners with God. We are subject to the unknown mystery of how God’s reign takes hold and grows. On one hand this can feel powerless but on the other a bit liberating. For, we are reminded not to take our community outreach, our programs, and our efforts too seriously. For, as Rev. Dr. Lamar Williamson puts it, “against such arrogant

¹ <https://www.davidlose.net/2015/06/pentecost-3-b-preach-the-truth-slant/>

self-importance stands a subtle allusion to God's hidden presence and power."²

The second parable focuses on a specific type of seed - the mustard seed. This seed produces an invasive weed in the Middle East. It is a bush that takes over and penetrates like an out-of-control bindweed, glossy buckthorn, or creeping Charlie. Yet, this mustard bush is what Jesus compares to God's realm. And, Jesus used humorous satire to explain how God's kingdom works. He knows it's a weed; after all, this seed was forbidden to be planted into gardens because of its invasiveness. This bush is neither grand like a cedar nor does it produce large branches. Jesus also knows that the last thing we'd want to attract to our gardens are birds that will eat the crops. Yet, Jesus reminds us that the way God works is like that invasive weed. For God's vision grows and runs out of our control. It brings in those undesirable birds, or more literally, those loser fisherman, prostitutes, criminals, and tax collectors loathed by the religious establishment. It's God's realm that brings in the desperate, the lowly, and the hopeless. Those who have no money to support a capital campaign, those who leave things everywhere in the basement, and those who do not talk, act, walk, or live like we do.

It's fitting that these two parables confront us the day before our church commemorates the Emanuel Nine. For it was an ELCA member and self-proclaimed white supremacist who walked into a Bible study at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina and killed nine congregants because they were black. The shooter was one of us. His

² Lamar Williamson, *Interpretation: Mark*, p. 98

ELCA church read these parables every three years. I imagine that the murder was reminded of God's vision of love, justice, and peace. Yet, that white supremacist did not sprout love in the soil, nor did he understand how God's reign shelters those on the margins. And while we might not pull a trigger, we too fail to recognize God's vision sprouting and taking over the gardens we've come to idolize. We too fail to imagine a city, state, and nation that is a refuge for all people. We too must understand that we do not always hear the parables Jesus shared and strive to live as God's beloved children.

Yet, these parables are for us. For us who struggle, who feel rejected, who wonder about the future ahead. These parables are for us who have lost, who have yearned, and who have been hurt. For there is an out-of-control bush growing among us. It's a weed that proclaims room enough for all to rest. It's God's mysterious ways of bringing faith and love through the unexpected. It's God's promise that we who are in need will experience God's surprising grace and disruptive love.

Dear friends, as we go off into the week ahead, go with the reminder that it's not your sole responsibility to bring about God's reign of love, justice, and peace. Because God first loved us, continue to sow love in the world. But remember that God's mysterious spirit is what will assist in allowing the seed to take root. And at the same time, know that God's reign is a rambunctious runner of a weed that will spread and grow and take over the world. Know that God's reign is built for you, for me, and for everyone that the world calls undesirable. For we have a God that takes the seeds we throw and does the rest. And we have a God that transforms what the world rejects as weeds and makes them into shelter for all. Thanks be to God! Amen.