

Message for the Third Sunday after Pentecost, Year B (6/13/2021)
Mark 4:26-34

Can you imagine how maddening it would be to run with a teacher who spoke only in parables? Mark mentions that Jesus' listeners received his word "as they were able to hear it," which implies that there was much in his parables that they weren't able to hear or comprehend. And, although Jesus went out of his way to interpret the parables to his disciples in private, we know that even they continued to misunderstand his message, and that he continued to be frustrated with them. So, why teach in parables in the first place? Why not just come out and say what you mean?

We like clarity; we like efficiency; we like to know the list of expectations so we can meet them, and so we can identify those who aren't measuring up. But, **parables resist neat and tidy interpretations. Since they aren't commandments or instructions, there's nothing to do, but only something to observe and appreciate:** "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.... It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

These parables evoke the mystery of God’s gracious providence. God is at work in the rich darkness of the soil to nurture the life that God intends for the world. And, like the shoot that emerges from a tiny seed, negligible and inert, in time that life grows and thrives even apart from our anxious fussing. “The kingdom of God is like a sleeping gardener,” as Wendy Farley summarizes. “Or perhaps the kingdom is like a gardener who [sleeps] through the growing season but wakes up in time for the harvest.”¹ Poet Wendell Berry puts it this way: “No leaf or grain is filled / By work of ours; the field is tilled / And left to grace.”²

Although we might prefer clear-cut teachings, Jesus’ parables provide for a much richer experience of the word of God. Parables are more intimate, lodging more deeply in the heart, and thus they always invite further examination, further conversation. And, this is the process by which we grow ever closer to the God whose truth lies at the heart of these little stories. To quote Don Saliers, parables are “elusive yet pointed, indirect yet powerfully relevant – like the very kingdom Jesus brings.”³

Can you imagine how maddening, and how wonderful, it would be to run with a teacher who spoke only in parables? **Consider what might happen if we abandoned our pursuit of the right answers in favor of Jesus’ creative ambiguity. Consider what it might mean to crack open the multiplicity of**

¹ *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3, 140.

² “Sabbath Poem X.”

³ *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3, 140.

meanings and dwell with them. Suddenly, the spiritual life would be less something we work to achieve and more the “process of waking up to signs of God’s presence and activity in the world.”⁴ Suddenly, ministry would be less a strategy for success and more an attentiveness to God’s recurring offer of grace.

And, like the flourishing of a mustard bush, that grace is more expansive than we expect. I’m repeatedly amazed at the power of grace to “give space for nesting and growth,”⁵ to give space for rest and hope, to give space for belonging and joy, in a world where that kind of space is hard to find.

In *Searching for Sunday*, Rachel Held Evans tells the story of a young man named Andrew whom she met at a conference. The child of a pastor, Andrew grew up struggling with his sexuality on account of his church’s teachings. “Do you care what I’m going through, God?” he once scrawled in his prayer journal, “Why did you make me this way? What are you trying to teach me...?”

Although Andrew eventually embraced his identity, when he came out to his family, they rejected him. But, having found his way into another congregation, one that loved and supported him, Andrew decided he wanted to be baptized, and wanted Rachel to be there even though he knew her only through her online presence.

Why this invitation from a stranger, you may wonder. The author reflects, “I was part of the only family he had. Andrew’s adoption into God’s family had

⁴ Ben Robinson, Preaching Peace Tacoma Table, June 8, 2021.

⁵ members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources#resources.

been far more tumultuous and painful than my own, but he wanted me to be a part of it simply because I was among those who would not turn him away, simply because I loved him as he was. Sometimes the church must be a refuge even to its own refugees.”⁶

Rachel Held Evans would have turned forty years old this past Tuesday.

“When [like a seed, the kingdom of God] is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.” **What grace that we’re invited to take refuge in the branches of the tree of life, and what a privilege to extend that grace to others, to make space among the branches especially for those who are most battered by the wind. Thanks be to God whose kingdom comes on Earth as in heaven, that we might all find a home there.**

⁶ 34-5.