

I.

Jesus is sitting in a fishing boat with his friends, rocking back and forth in the gentle waves of the sea, reclined most likely, and he's telling them stories about what the Kingdom of God is like. The stories are simple and he draws on what he knows: seeds and soil; grains and shrubs. He is painting a picture for them, a picture of the vast mystery of God and from time to time I think he lets his hand fall over the side of the boat and dip into the water; he pauses to stare out at the place where the heavens dip down into the sea and with his words, with his parables, he opens for them a basket full of treasure, a treasure that is held in their own hearts.

It's no easy task to draw the minds of humans up into the mystery of God. Have you ever tried to describe the Kingdom of God to anybody? It's like describing inner peace or world harmony or cheese grits, but Jesus makes it seem as simple as scattering seeds on the ground and calling it a day. Without fear that they won't get it, without anxiously explaining every detail and making sure everyone is on the same page, Jesus just tosses these stories out there and trusts the parables themselves to do the work, slowly, over a lifetime.

Really, it's so empowering, so trusting of us: the hearers. I've grown accustomed to having experts and journalists and bloggers and online communities tell me every single detail of whatever the current crisis is and how I am suppose to feel about it and the right way to believe something. It's such a gift to have Jesus just tell me a story and give it time to grow, give me time to work on it – better yet, give the parable time to work on me. It's such a good feeling to know that our Lord Jesus thinks that we have within us all that is needed to receive this seed of a story and have it grow into a life of faith.

II.

I wanted to start my sermon the same way as him: "The Kingdom of God is as if..." but then, as I wracked my brain to come up with what the Kingdom of God is like, I kept coming up short. I'd think I had it but then when I started to put it down on paper I got nervous. It was too cliché or too silly or too stuffy. I prayed to the Holy Spirit about it and I asked Her, "Spirit, I'm trying to write this sermon on these two parables from Jesus, can you help me come up with an opening illustration that will draw everyone in, and maybe even make them chuckle? Holy Spirit, to what can *I* compare the Kingdom of God?" In her humor, because the Holy Spirit is very funny a lot of the time, she came to me in Melinda Sandkam who had just picked up the new Mission Camp t-shirts. They are yellow this year. Yellow means caution, slow down. And you know what those t-shirts say on the back? You've seen them. They say the same thing every year: "It's not all about me." The Holy Spirit said, "Caution. Slow down preacher. The Kingdom of God is not all about you. Jesus just told two stories about the Kingdom of God, why don't you start there, unless you truly think you can improve upon those." Well, a bit embarrassed, I said, "No, Spirit, I don't think I can come up with something better than our Lord," and I thanked her for her help.

III.

The real funny thing about it is I became a parable myself. You see, the seeds for understanding the Kingdom of God, they've already been planted in us by Jesus' Holy Word, we just need to sit with those stories, spend some time with God's word and let them do their own work in us. No need to try and plant some of my new, Genetically Modified seeds on top of the organic, native seeds God has already planted in us through the Bible.

The Kingdom of God: "It's as if someone just started scattering seeds on the ground with no regard for where they fell, no concern for the soil type or the weeds, or even tilling the earth. Just scattering them. And then didn't bother to cover them with earth or fertilize them, or even water them, rather just walked away and went to bed. And then the soil, the earth, stirs. In the Greek Jesus says *automate*, where we get the English: 'automatically,' *automate* "the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself." Something within the earth – perhaps the Spirit herself – turns those seeds into a fruitful harvest for when the seed-scatterer returns. That is what the Kingdom of God is like.

IV.

I wonder if you've noticed any of those seeds in your own life? Are there places where Jesus has planted some Bible story, some experience, some glimpse of the Kingdom of God? Perhaps that is the seed, deep inside of you that the Spirit is stirring. Perhaps that is the seed which you've recently felt sprouting in your life. Or maybe that is the seed you've felt drying up, withering and to which you must give some special attention. Where have the seeds of Christ landed in your life? They are there but we need to start looking for their little green shoots poking through.

The 16th century mystic Indian poet Kabir writes:
The Guest is inside you, and also inside me;
you know the sprout is hidden inside the seed.
We are all struggling; none of us has gone far.
Let your arrogance go, and look around inside.

The Psalm we read together in our Call to Worship says: The people of God, "still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap."

Jesus said, "The earth produces of herself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain."

Through the Prophet Isaiah God says, "See, I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

Alas, "we are all struggling, none of has gone far," but thanks be to God that the seeds are scattered among us and within us. Look around inside. Look around beyond yourself. Behold God is working wonders. We might take the time to notice and enjoy.

V.

To what can I compare the Kingdom of God? I know it's hard to really get at head-on. Maybe you like a good sound scholarly doctrine in your sermon and not a bunch of shifting parable. Well, I'll throw you a bone: Jesus is the doctrine and the parable. It's called *realized eschatology*- through Jesus' life as God incarnate, his death and resurrection, the reign of God is now realized among us, "a present reality, here and now."

So what parable will we use for it? Ah! I know: a mustard seed. Sure when you toss it on the ground, as our seed-sower is want to do willy-nilly, it looks pretty tiny, you probably won't even be able to see it, but when it grows it becomes one of the most majestic trees...wait...no...scratch that. Mark says it becomes one of the shrubbiest of shrubs, the perfect place to build a nest and settle in.

I realized I don't know a lot about mustard plants. I bet some of you do. I'm sure some of you have seen them growing wild. I went to the Journal of Natural History and what I was surprised to learn is that the mustard seed is not like the great cedar to which Ezekiel compares God's reign in the text Erickson read for us earlier; wild mustard is an expansive shrub that will take over. It germinates rapidly and is hardy and intrusive. Ezekiel says God will plant on the high mountain a "noble cedar that will grow tall and "under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind." Jesus says, "No. The Kingdom of God is not a noble, big steeple cedar tree but a mustard shrub."

To put this parable into terms we might relate to here in Atlanta: the kingdom of God is like kudzu. You might imagine the Kingdom of God to be like the indigenous mighty Southern Live Oak, our state tree, tall and broad, a beacon of light for all the sad and desperate underbrush, but really it's like kudzu. That which wraps itself around the Live Oak and will never let go. It's not glamorous and flashy, it's intrusive and subversive and disruptive. It sneaks in when you're not expecting and it creeps around and climbs into your heart and your mind and takes over your whole being.

Beth Baer and John Watson and Lester Morris were here last weekend doing some gardening and they cut back of lot of English Ivy that had crept from the neighbor's onto the church property. We thank you for your work. You know what happens if the seed of The Kingdom of God creeps onto church property? It takes over; it might even look undesirable. It fills up all the pews; it climbs to very highest point of the steeple where all the neighbors can see. It provokes calls the HOA president, and you can't get rid of it. The more you chop it the faster it spreads. This is the Kingdom of God.

VI.

My friend Peter Hobbie once told me a story about a man from up north who was visiting some friends. They took a trip out to a farm. The farmer showed the gentleman all around: took him to see the rows of cotton and peanuts; showed him his new hen house, and finally down to the pond near some woods. The man noticed the trees there at the edge of the woods were covered by a thick, bright green blanket of vines. He was mesmerized by the way the broad leaves moved in the breeze like waves across the tree tops. In amazement the man asked the farmer what it was. "Kudzu," the farmer replied.

“It’s incredible!” the man said, “How do you grow it?” thinking he might like to take a bit home with him and plant some along his fence. “Well,” the farmer explained, “It’s very delicate. First you need to get a little clipping of it and make sure you cut the stem at an angle. Then quickly but carefully wrap it in a damp paper towel – not soaking wet, just damp—and seal it up in a Ziploc bag. Make sure you don’t let that paper towel dry out. When you get home, clear a little place for it in your garden and be real careful as you remove it from the bag and unwrap it. Maybe spritz a little water on the leaves to wake it up a bit, then, when you’re ready, drop it and run like hell.

The Beloved Community of God is hardy and intrusive. It spreads within us and it spreads beyond us. And, by the grace of God, it will take over, no matter how much we ignore it or try to tame it, or pretty it up or cut it back.

VII.

To what can we compare the Kingdom of God? It’s like an amazing gift that was already given to us, it’s all around us, it creeps out of pages of your Bible, and it’s in the prayers you offer up to God. To what can we compare the Kingdom of God? It is like a hardy, tough, stubborn little church filled with the most welcoming and generous people you can meet, sprouting from seeds scattered 60 years ago on Morningside Drive, now firmly planted with creeping, shrubby branches that reach all over this city: which crawl in the homeless shelters and food pantries; children’s hospitals and nursing homes; even into the halls of the state capital; branches that reach around the entire world, large branches that have become a home to the homeless, a resting place for transient college students and those passing through who just needed a place to rest and receive the hospitality and healing love of this place and who have now moved on. It is hardy and at times intrusive but strives to be authentic and always welcoming, subversive and disruptive when truth must be spoken to power and the vulnerable must be protected but also nurturing and safe. Parents have made nests for their children and youth in the safety of its branches and now those youth fly out into the world carrying the seeds of faith they were fed in the comfort and shade of this place, seeds which they will now share with God’s beloved in New Orleans.

To what can I compare the Kingdom of God? Pick up the Bible and hold it in your hands. It is like the ancient texts which God still uses to speak to us and heal us and train us. The Kingdom is in your hands. To what can I compare the Kingdom of God? Look around at the people in this sanctuary. The Kingdom of God is among you. To what can I compare the Kingdom of God? Take a deep breath. The Kingdom is within you.

“With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables...”