

Mark 4:26-34
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Pentecost 4
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Parables

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Jesus said, "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. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? 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."

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, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Parables

Jesus divides his listeners into two groups: insiders (his own disciples) and outsiders (everyone else). I'm thankful to be an insider and I'm guessing that you are to. We became insiders at our own baptisms.

Jesus gives his own disciples (the insiders) further explanation of this morning's parables leaving those who are not yet committed to him confused and hopefully wanting more.

Jesus is sometimes obtuse as he teaches. The same can be said of many of those who hear him. "Obtuse" has two very different meanings. The first applies to many of his listeners, they were lacking the sensibility to understand what he was teaching.

The second meaning of obtuse concerns Jesus and his parables. These parables are sometimes unclear and difficult to comprehend leaving us to wonder what he really means.

Jesus states in our reading this morning that he is teaching and will continue to teach in parables and parables can be obtuse. Parables tell a story, but leave the listener to figure out the message that the story holds. Parables make us think and I believe that Jesus wants us to contemplate and ponder these stories. He explained today's parables only to his own disciples and he did it in private.

For those of us interested in words, I'll note that apparently the Greek verb tense used in this passage suggests that his disciples regularly asked Jesus for further explanation of his parables and that makes me less frustrated with myself when I find them confusing and difficult to understand. The 'outsiders' spoken of in our reading were also lacking the sensibility to understand what he was teaching. They struggled with his meaning and probably discussed what he said with one another.

I'm hopeful that many of them were drawn deeper into the extraordinary opportunity in front of them. The extraordinary opportunity to learn from Jesus himself. To hear the voice and to see the actions of God made man.

We do not have the same opportunity, but we do have the benefit of The Holy Spirit, the scriptures in our New Testament, and more than 2000 years of Christian study to further our understanding.

Jesus most certainly wasn't and isn't lacking in sensibility or understanding. That definition of 'obtuse' doesn't fit him at all, but the second meaning of the word does fit. Jesus is obtuse as he speaks of grain growing in the earth and birds nesting in mustard plants, but he tells us that he explained their meaning to his own disciples his own disciples who are the 'insiders'. Insiders are 'good soil' in which his seeds will flourish.

His insiders of that day had given their lives over to him. They left their earthly desires behind and devoted themselves to following him. We are called to do the same.

Brother Curtis at the Society of Saint John the Evangelist says this,

“That is what our baptism is all about: God coming to live within us – not just beyond us, or around us, but within us.”

At our baptism we are invited into an intimate relationship with The Trinity and it is the Holy Spirit that calls us back time and time again into that intimacy.

We become ‘insiders’ at our baptism. The Good News is that everyone can be an insider. Jesus came so that every soul has the opportunity to be an insider. This is not an exclusive group.

The ‘outsiders’ listening to Jesus had that opportunity too and some of them, undoubtedly, took it. Thousands more took the opportunity to be saved on the day of Pentecost and beyond and the kingdom of God grew.

Both parables we hear today speak of “The kingdom of God” The first talks of it’s mystery and the second, of its unwavering and gentle strength.

As he tells the story of seed being scattered on the ground and growing into life-sustaining food, he speaks of the mystery that causes this to happen. Most of us take for granted or even ignore the miracle of life around us. The miracle of a seed becoming what God intended.

The image brought to mind in this parable focuses on seeds used in farming, but all of us here today are blessed to be surrounded by God’s Glory as brought forth in our meadows and forests. There too seeds are scattered by wind and birds and those seeds grow to sustain life as well.

Our second parable this morning is the one about the mustard seed. In this parable Jesus likens Heaven to the itty bitty mustard seed. This little seed grows up to become the greatest of all shrubs. A great shrub that protects and gives comfort to birds. I’m struck by the imagery of shrubs and birds.

Jesus doesn’t speak of grandiose mountains that are stalked by magnificent tigers. He doesn’t conjure up images of great Redwoods that tower over forests in which Eagles make their home. He speaks of birds and shrubs when he describes Heaven. Humble and lovely. Peaceful and comforting.

Every soul, even the most humble and ordinary and especially the most lowly and also the most lofty are called to become servants of God. Servants of each another.

We each are invited, but more than that, we are called to become 'insiders' as we who have been baptized already are.

As insiders we feel the pull to become closer and closer and closer still to God through The Holy Spirit's encouragement, guiding, and love. I pray that we will listen to the Spirit's call and let the good (the good that is our Creator's gift to us) take hold of our lives and never let us go.

Amen.