

"The kingdom of God is like ..."

A sermon by the Rev. Frances Savill

Sunday June 13, 2021

Mark 4:26-34

We pray the Lord's prayer together Sunday by Sunday.
Many of you pray it at other times in your week.
And one of the things we pray is: "Thy Kingdom come..."

But the kingdom of God isn't just something we pray for and it seems, according to Jesus' teaching that it isn't understood simply in straight-line approaches.

The kingdom is understood through the use of parables.

Parables are these interesting stories that teach us and stay with us, they act like yeast to flour, changing the whole mixture.

They take time to think through- they are more like poetry, art and music, then they are logic, problem solving, and engineering.

Parables are narrative contrasts – Eugene Peterson somewhere calls them, more provocatively, "narrative time bombs" – that are meant to undermine our assumptions of the various "givens" and even "realities" that we accept unquestioningly and offer us a vision of something different.

But at the end of the parables, Mark assures us that disciples of Jesus, who listen to him, who stay close to him, will be given understanding of the parable, and the message of the kingdom.

So to what shall we compare the kingdom of God?

A man sows seed, and after he does the planting he watches in amazement as the seed sprouts and grows.

The kingdom is something we take part in, we sow seed, it's something we work at, something intentional that we take part in.

I came across a quote that struck me as helpful.

It comes from Rich Stearn, who was the President of World Vision.

He says: *"Being salt and light in our country means protecting the vulnerable, opposing injustice, welcoming the stranger, providing for the poor and living lives of integrity and generosity. It's not about waging war on the culture, it's about modeling the culture we want to see."*

We probably won't stumble into living the change... it will take intentionality.

The sower sows seeds, intentionally, generously, and remarkably seeds start to sprout.

Planting seeds is always an act of faith and hope.

We plant these dry, lifeless looking seeds, but something happens, they come to life, they bear fruit.

That is good news.

This parable of the seed that is sowed, and the miraculous growth of a blade, then a stock, and then the whole ear and the harvest, tells us with surety that God is working out his plan.

We sow the kingdom in acts of kindness, acts of justice, modeling life in the kingdom, providing for the poor, acting generously and graciously.

And I think this parable invites us to be confident and calm, composed and even cheerful, because God's kingdom is being established whether we always see it or not.

It is for us to intentionally, sow the seed, being God's people, living our faith as well as we can day by day, and then trust waiting and watching.

I was struck this week as we heard the news of the Muslim family killed in London, Ontario.
It was labelled a "hate" crime.

Two weeks ago the news was filled with the discovery of the mass grave in Kamloops.

How do we respond? We pray, yes.

How does a friend respond?

That's the question I have asked myself repeatedly.

Maybe we could respond with a card, a note, something to express our concern, our care, so that these people hear that we are not part of the "hate."

We sow seeds – God may lead you to take other action- gestures some larger, some smaller, but all for the kingdom that we serve.

Our lives are made up of gestures, actions, words, most of them small, but we have experienced the difference they make in us, in our lives, in our world.

We have seen how God changes us, we've seen it in each other, we are not the same people we used to be.

Through the patient work of the Holy Spirit, God's word bears fruit in us, and in our world.

The second parable is similar to the first.

It is also somewhat surprising.

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, tiny and insignificant, but it grows to be something quite large.

It's hard to get rid of it.

Now it is interesting to me that the kingdom of God in this parable is not a cedar seed or an acorn.

The seed doesn't grow into one of the towering cedars of Lebanon, or a mighty oak tree.

There is not the splendour and greatness we might want.

We can't force or coerce God's reign of redemptive and surprising love and grace, but neither can we control it, moderate it, or domesticate it. And we definitely can't stop it. In this sense, it is more like the mustard plant that, like an out of control weed, grows and spreads and can hardly be contained, even if you're not sure you want it.

But the seed grows to become a shrub that is a home to birds. The imagery is used in the Hebrew Scriptures to picture the nations of the world that come to God's people for refuge and turn to God in faith and hope.

All find a home, all find shelter in this kingdom of God.

"The passage as a whole emphasizes the hiddenness and smallness of the quiet beginnings of the kingdom and also underscores the sense in which the sower does not make the kingdom happen by force of will; indeed, the sower of the parable doesn't even water or weed! The sower just sows and then sleeps and rises night and day, and the earth produces of itself, and the mustard plant puts forth its large branches. The kingdom grows organically. And inevitably, as day follows night, God's hidden, mysterious work in the world and in us will be fruitful.

Meanwhile as the kingdom gestates and sprouts, proximity to Jesus and his way puts us in a position to learn more about the kingdom so that we don't miss the quiet growth of the familiar mustard plant in our own garden or indeed the "garden plots" of hungry listeners already springing up around Jesus and nesting in the shade of his fruitful, abundant, sheltering grace." (Meda Stamper)