

Sermon for Sunday, January 14, 2024

Mark 4:1-34

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Today's Scripture reading contains three parables. Over many years it has become practice to give each of the parables a name. In today's reading we have the Parable of the Sower, the Parable of the Growing Seed and the Parable of the Mustard Seed. It is reasonable to assume that the writer of the gospel of Mark grouped these parables together because of the common theme of seeds and growing. But these parables also give us glimpses or new understandings of God and God's kingdom.

The Parable of the Sower is familiar to many of us. It's a story of amazing and illogical generosity in the broadcasting of seed. I'm certain that every farmer in this church would be appalled at the thought that 75% of the seed would be spread on soil that is so inhospitable that there is almost no hope of growth or harvest. Economically speaking it would be considered idiotic. They simply wouldn't do such a thing.

Agronomists who study such matters have looked at this parable and come to the conclusion that the best yield of grain planted on the favorable ground using the skills of the time would be at most 6-fold. In other words, one seed could potentially produce six seeds; one bushel of seed grain would produce six bushels. But in this parable the yield is beyond any human possibilities: 30 or 60 or even 100 fold! The farmers and small hold landowners who were listening to Jesus tell this parable would have been amazed. (They also might have thought he was crazy—or at least knew nothing about growing crops in Galilee!)

But that's not why Jesus told parables. The purpose of parables is that they are intended to teach us about God's way of looking at the world and about God's economics. As Jesus tells the first one we learn something amazing about God's economics: God can accomplish far more than we humans can accomplish, predict, or even dare imagine. God does things differently and is not driven by a profit motive. God is driven by love and a deep regard for the potential of every seed that is planted in the heart of a human.

The vast majority of commentators affirm that in this parable God is the sower of the seeds. Christians affirm that the seed of faith is

planted in the heart of every baptized person and that God is the one who plants that seed. (BTW, it doesn't matter one little bit who the pastor is who performs the baptism, nor whether they are a good pastor or perform poorly. Baptism is an action taken by God.)

Sometimes preachers will use this parable and challenge the listener to consider whether they are good soil, rocky soil, or soil full of weeds. I'm not going in that direction today. Rather I want us to consider ourselves as partners with God in the work of the kingdom. If we do that, then what part do we play in this parable?

Here at Vasa we gather and we worship and we pray and we teach and we study the Bible and when we can we help others in need. As a gathering of the faithful, we try to be a place of good soil where the fresh seeds of new people coming here will be nurtured. We have been doing that for over 165 years. Think of all of the meals that have been served, all of the children that were taught about God in Sunday school, all of the Bible studies, all of the worship services! It is almost beyond our imagination. Vasa Congregation has easily touched the lives of thousands of people!

In the parable of the sower we interpreters/listeners recognize that God is the sower. The second parable of the Growing Seed shifts the focus. It's not quite as obvious that the person planting the seed is God. Instead the sower spreads the seed and then walks away allowing nature to take its' course. The sower simply lives, sleeping and rising; taking a very hands off approach to the nurturing and growth of the seed. Nonetheless there is a harvest which the sower manages and brings in to the granary.

This might be a description of our partnership with God in the nurturing of the seed. When we nurture the word of God among children and youth, we are nurturing seeds of faith. We have absolutely no idea what's going to happen to those seeds. We don't know how the faith of those children and youth is going to grow. There are success stories and we can allow those stories to encourage us. But there are also stories of folks young and old who drifted away. Now I'm not saying they are not faithful people in their own way. Sometimes all that can be said is that their faith is not visible to us. Ever the optimist I try to find that seed of faith, the tiny sprout struggling to survive and nurture it. So when you hear that I'm visiting folks and you wonder: why them? Or perhaps, are they even members of Vasa? Recognize that it has mostly to do with the idea that at that moment the scorching sun is shining down on them and drying them out or the weeds of illness are trying to choke the tiny sprout of faith struggling to survive. As

a partner with God in ministry in the world I'm called to try to strengthen the sprouts that are struggling. Now, I'm not alone in this work, all of us work together in our individual ways as God gives us opportunity to nurture the faith of others.

The final parable in today's reading is the parable of the mustard seed. In it we learn of a tiny seed that is planted and grows into a shrub that houses the birds of the air. Faith is like that. It's a tiny seed that is planted by God in our baptisms. Given the right nurturing this faith will grow and mature. The faith of a single person can be that which sustains others (the birds of the air) when there is need. In other words, the faith of one person can carry another when there is a tragedy or deep sorrow and their faith is tottering.

Now there is another way to think of the parable of the mustard seed and that is specific to a congregation. This congregation was planted here by Dr. Norelius and the many Swedish immigrants that settled in this area. As you know the original church building was a log house. But the congregation quickly grew and a second church was built. The congregation continued to grow and that's when this building was built. And it all happened in about 15 years! Vasa congregation was a mustard seed planted here in this village. Over the years people (birds) have landed here, rested, been protected from storms, and moved on. That's part of the work/purpose of this church: to provide comfort, solace, protection, and sustenance in times of need.

All three of these parables are intended to give us glimpses of God's kingdom. As a recap:

- In the first parable God spreads the seeds all over and does so using God's logic and God's economics; not human logic.
- In providing a glimpse of God's kingdom in the second parable we learn that seed is planted and that it grows until it is time for harvest. We don't know how the growth process works. But as every farmer knows: at some point it is time for the harvest. Harvest is not something to be frightened of: it is simply the time when the fruit of the growing season must be brought into the granary. It is up to God to decide when that time will be.
- In the third parable an unlikely seed grows into a shrub; not a tree but simply a shrub. It's not huge but it is big enough to provide safety for the vulnerable. The good news is that even a seemingly insignificant shrub provides shelter for the birds of the air.

It helps to know that God's logic means that seeds are broadcast to even the most unlikely places. It helps to know that God is the determiner of when the kingdom's harvest is going to occur. It helps to know that even insignificant places provide respite and safety for the vulnerable. These parables provide us with glimpses of God and God's kingdom. They are intended to help us to understand the God we worship and to nurture our faith. For that we can give thanks. Amen.