

Pentecost 3B, Proper 6. Mark 4:26-34. June 13, 2021.

It is almost always a bad idea to try to explain Jesus' parables. It is always equally true to say that they reveal too much to be explained, and that they reveal too little to be explained. They disclose truth and they baffle, and a certain kind of head-scratching can be very much a faithful response. Even when we get an explanation from Jesus himself, we also often get the sense that there is excess meaning around the edges. They're timely and timeless, first spoken in a particular context with nuances we can no longer access, and still speaking in new ways to us today.

Rather than asking in a blunt way what the parables mean, as if they were mathematical equations that we could solve, I often think that it's better to be content to ask what we are hearing in them this time. This question acknowledges that they continue to disclose truth, unfolding over the course of our lives and the life of the church. And it leaves room for there always to be more meaning, more truth, more revelation in or behind them than any one interpretation is going to give. What are we hearing, and how will we respond?

The gospel of Mark doesn't include very many long passages of Jesus teaching, but chapter four, where we are today, is one. Most of the verses immediately preceding our passage are Mark's version of the parable of the sower, the one where a guy goes out and throws seed all over the place, and then we hear the fate of the seed this profligate farmer has thrown around. That parable is one of the ones that Jesus explains himself. And then after a brief interlude, we are back among the seeds, hearing of their secret growth and the promise of great results from small beginnings.

I suspect that this second, more familiar parable of the mustard seed is a kind of time capsule, aimed at a community that had reason to hope that they would have made more progress than they have. A community whose momentum is stalled or invisible, that might be a little frustrated, would surely do well to remember the mustard seed and the ways it is illustrative of the kingdom of God. God's delight in transforming the lowly and unpromising into that which provides succor for the world goes all the way down. Of course that's how God's kingdom works—it's how Jesus worked, who Jesus was, and how the God of Israel always seems to work.

But I am more drawn today to this less famous parable of the seed's secret growth in the ground. "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, and 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."

There's a beauty here, and mystery. What I am hearing is a parable about living out of control. The farmer does things: he scatters seed and when there is a harvest, he goes out and reaps it. But the most important part of his work, the actual growth of the seed, is totally outside of his control and his understanding. The heart of his work is a mystery (in the theological sense, rather than the Sherlock Holmes sense), as, finally, the heart of each of our lives is a mystery.

Living with mystery, living out of control, is hard. So much teaches us to crave predictability and control. We can see this without even leaving the realm of Jesus' original allusion: farming is nothing like this anymore. Farmers today know exactly how the seed sprouts and grows, and what pH levels are needed in the soil, and the chemical makeup of the seeds. We couldn't abide mystery and lack of control over something as important as producing soy beans and ethanol. But in the things that matter most, we continue to find ourselves living out of control. Will our children turn out to be good and happy? For how much longer will I be reasonably healthy? How many more conversations will I get with mom? When will I catch a

break and be able to get out of this financial hole? When will normal return, and just how close to normal will it actually be? Will she ever forgive me?

We aren't helpless in any of these examples, but we also are not in control of them. No amount of effort will guarantee the result we want, and insisting on bringing mystery under control finally ends in violence and death. And so we need to learn how to live out of control, how to live with mystery. Just naming it has a power. Because we crave control and predictability so strongly, there is a deep power in just speaking the truth—that life is not like that. Part of virtue is learning to discern what is and is not ours to control. A non-biblical response to this parable tells of a guy who planted a seed and then, to be sure that it was growing correctly, dug it up every day to check on it and then would re-bury it until the next day, when he would dig it up and check again.

The farmer of Jesus' parable is wiser than that. He knows what is his to do, and where he must trust God and the earth. This kind of wisdom is usually bought with some pain. Usually, we come by it only after we've tried to control everything and have dug up our seed every day until it dies. The wise farmer of Jesus' parable is not passive, though. He does the work of scattering the seed, and he does the work of bringing in the harvest. But in between all that hard work, he does impossible things: he waits on and trusts in things that he doesn't fully understand and cannot control.

To live well and faithfully without being in control is not to do nothing. It is to discern what we can do and what we can't, to wait on those mysteries that take time, and to pay attention so that when it is our time to act again, we do. Waiting, praying, and paying attention are especially hard in our culture—and they are an indispensable part of a faithful life. In the secret hearts of our lives, God has planted seeds that are sprouting, we do not know how. But God is trustworthy and the harvest will come, if only we're paying close enough attention to notice. Amen.