

Holy Textures

Understanding the Bible in its own time and in ours

Mark 4:26-34,

Year B, Pentecost 2

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

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This week, we return to reading through the Gospel of Mark. Having read most of Chapter 1 way back in Epiphany, we skip Chapters 2 and 3. Malina & Rohrbaugh title the section, Mark 3:7 to 8:26:

Back and Forth at Sea with Jesus and His Disciples.

Chapter 4 is a miniature, "Sermon by the Sea:"

- Verses 1-9, The Parable of the Sower and the Soils.
- Verses 10-12, An explanation of why Jesus teaches using parables.
- Verses 13-20, Jesus explains the Parable of the Sower to his inner circle.
- Verses 21-23, The Parable of Light Brought into a House.
- Verses 24-25, A Caution about Measure / Judgement: What you give (to others) will be given to you (by God).
- Verses 26-29, A Kingdom Parable: Like a Seed That Grows All By Itself.
- Verses 30-32, A Kingdom Parable: Like the Smallest Seed That Grows Beyond All Expectations.
- Verses 33-34, A concluding comment about using, and explaining, parables.

This week's lesson with 2 parables and a concluding comment about having the ears to hear their inner meaning is going to make for tough sermon choices!

I don't know Greek well enough - actually, I no longer know Greek at all - but I am intrigued by the nuances in the English translation used by the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV):

NIV (and others): This is what the Kingdom of God **is like**. A man **scatters** seed ...

NRSV: The Kingdom of God **is as if** someone **would scatter** seed ...

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The indefiniteness of the NRSV translation - to my ear at least - provokes a question, an invitation, a possibility for participation. If the Kingdom is *as if* someone *would* ... Who might that someone be? When might that someone scatter seed? Could that someone be me / us?

I love that in this parable the action shifts away from the sower - who has no idea how things happen with the seed - they just go about their day. And shifts away from the seed as well - it is the **SOIL** that produces of itself.

As someone who has spent their life in an action-oriented denomination, I find comfort and discomfort in this parable.

The comfort is to consider the possibility that the most helpful thing I could do to advance the Kingdom of God is to take a nap.

The discomfort is to consider the certainty that the point of the parable is neither the sower, nor the seed, nor the soil, nor the sprout, nor the stalk, but the fruit. I wonder what would happen if every single Christian and congregation pondered the question of fruitfulness - not as the outcome of OUR actions but as a grace received - we don't know how?

Verse 30 is often formatted in most translations as the opening sentence in the paragraph which goes on with the parable of the mustard seed. Since the original Greek text had neither paragraphs nor verse numbers, it is possible to just let the verse stand on its own as an invitation by Jesus for us to respond to:

With what can we compare the Kingdom of God? What parable will we use for it?

Go ahead. Take your time. With what would you compare the Kingdom of God? What parable would you use for it?

Jesus himself resorts to comedic exaggeration. A mustard seed??!!! The Kingdom of God is like ... a mustard seed? C'mon, surely the Kingdom of God is like something majestic, something powerful, something really big. Like a mountain, or a cedar, or an eagle.

A mustard seed? This is like comparing the Kingdom of God to a dandelion. It sows itself. It shows up in our ordered lives without our planning or expectation. It is tough to get rid of, in fact impossible to get rid of. But we do try to get rid of it so that the order we have planned can continue unblemished. It is impossible to tame; to get it to grow only where we want.

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Personally, I take comfort in the concluding comments:

he spoke the word to them, *as they were able to hear it* (i.e., understand it)

he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Jesus understands our limitations and speaks to us in ways we can understand; and even then goes the extra step of explaining everything to his followers (who must be even dumber since they need a further explanation even after Jesus has spoken in ways we can understand).

As the parables themselves have already explained, the Kingdom of God is not dependant on our getting it right - or even getting it at all! If even the original 12 need extra help because they don't understand, this is a group that I can aspire to imitate!

Surely this is Good News.

David Ewart,

www.davidewart.ca