

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
June 14, 2015  
Pentecost 3  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Ezekiel 31:1-14  
Psalm 92  
2 Corinthians 5:1-10  
Mark 4:26-34

Our Gospel lesson today features two brief parables from the lips of Jesus. Before we look at them, I want to revisit the whole notion of *parables* themselves. Near the end of our text Mark tells us that when it came to his *public* teaching about God's Kingdom, Jesus used parables exclusively (v. 34). Just prior to this, Mark says that Jesus used parables to teach the people "as much as they were able to understand" (v. 33).

Mark seems to imply that parables are necessary because the message Jesus shares is difficult to hear, comprehend, or believe. It is as if Jesus knows that the truth about God that he brings is unexpected, and that his hearers cannot take it in all at once.

Jesus' use of parables reminds me of Emily Dickinson, who wrote:

*Tell all the truth but tell it slant –  
Success in Circuit lies  
Too bright for our infirm Delight  
The Truth's superb surprise  
As Lightning to the Children eased  
With explanation kind  
The Truth must dazzle gradually  
Or every man be blind.*

And just as Jesus' parables were mysterious and enigmatic to those who first heard them, I must confess to you that they have also been challenging for me to preach. Intuitively, I think I know why this is so. It's because we human beings have a tendency to want to subdue Jesus' message, to domesticate it, to rub off its hard edges and to fit it nicely into our prefabricated boxes. It's the age old sin of human beings wanting to remake God in *our* image. Preachers are not exempt from this tendency.

So, when it comes to Jesus' parables, it becomes very tempting to treat them like *fables*. A fable is usually a clever story whose goal is to offer some insight and instruction about life. They are especially handy when you want to teach children.

Consider *Aesop's fables*. When you want to teach the lesson that slow, steady perseverance pays off, you pull out the story of the *Tortoise and the Hare*. Or, when you want to emphasize the lesson that honesty is always the best policy, you dust off the story of *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*.

But Jesus' parables are not fables. They are not clever, cute, moralistic stories. They do not merely *teach* us something; they *confront us* with truth about God and ourselves that is often both *surprising and unwanted*. And the most

effective way to do that with people is to give them a little bit at a time. In the words of Dickinson, to “tell the truth slant.”

Jesus’ parables are like “narrative time bombs.” [This is an image from Christian author Eugene Peterson] You hear a parable, you wonder about it. You ponder it. It teases your mind into active thought. After serious reflection you think that maybe you’ve “got it.” And then as you walk away, the truth of what Jesus says explodes full force with a great, big *kaboom!* In the words of Emily Dickinson, it can blind you with its vision. It can turn your world upside down. It can shake you to the very foundation.

The Psalm writer says: “Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.” That is an image we can support and get behind. But if I said to you that Jesus, the Living Word, is a highly charged bomb capable of shattering your construction of reality, what would you say? When was the last time in your life that the bomb went off?

Now to our text, and to these two short parables.

I’m going to deal with the second of the parables today, because to deal with them both would take too much time. I have addressed the first parable in my sermon from this day in 2006. If you are morbidly curious about this first parable, you can consult that erudite sermonic offering!

Now to the second parable in the text.

Jesus says that God's Kingdom is like a mustard seed, the smallest of seeds. But it grows to such a size that birds can come to it and find shelter.

In the past I've preached on this, sharing how God can grow *small* things into *big* ones, how *grand* things can come from *small* beginnings. True, perhaps. But is it just me, or does that sound a lot like a *fable*?

So, let's try again. Let's look at the mustard seed, or mustard plant. Mustard is not like a flowering shrub that you might plant around your house as a sort of "accent" (like you would Lavender or such). Some believe that mustard is more like an *invasive weed*, something you want to keep out of your garden and lawn because it can run amok and easily take over whatever ground it inhabits.

Perhaps mustard that is sold should have a warning on the package: "use only in moderation," or some such. Perhaps: "use of this product may be hazardous."

And so it is with God's Kingdom. But God's Kingdom is not a commodity to be bought and sold. ***God's Kingdom is a new reality that invades, overturns, and eventually overcomes your old reality.***

God's Kingdom is a word of promise that creates hope. God's Kingdom leads people to leave their old ways in order to *live* into it. God's Kingdom leads people to change their jobs in order to *share* it. *God's Kingdom has a penchant for penetrating and taking over our lives, sometimes against our better judgment.*

*God's Kingdom is dangerous. It is hazardous, because you cannot control where it will take you or what you will do when it seizes hold of you.*

When Connie and I lived in Kentucky, there was a man in the church we attended named Clay Becknell. Clay had worked his entire career for the U.S. Postal Service. As his retirement drew near, everyone in the church thought that he and his wife would enjoy a very comfortable life with his substantial retirement pension. Then one Sunday night in church, Clay stood up and declared that he was giving his entire pension to the church. He and his wife would live on their Social Security and their modest savings.

I thought then – and still wonder today – whether that was one of the most foolish, absurd things I have ever seen anyone do. But what if ***God's Kingdom is a new reality that invades, overturns, and eventually overcomes your old reality?*** What about the mustard seed? Maybe Clay Becknell had had enough fables. Maybe a time bomb went off, and in the rubble he discovered a pearl so valuable that he spent his entire pension in order to lay hold of it.

The Kingdom of God is like a tiny mustard seed that grows to become one of the largest plants, with long branches where birds can come and find shelter. So says Jesus.

I'm no expert. But this is no fable. Something deeper, something more profound, is going on here. God's Kingdom comes. It comes of its own, and it

comes for us. It is a tenacious, consuming force. It overcomes insurmountable obstacles. It opens our eyes to new possibilities. It opens our hearts and fills them full of compassion for people who are different from us. It cleanses our wills, so that we choose to forgive others and root out bitterness and anger from our lives.

***It invades, overturns, and overcomes the kingdom of this world.***

You are about to come to the Table of the Lord. As you do, I'm going to place in your hands a sign of his grace. It is one of the *smallest* of signs. But the grace it conveys has the power to take hold of you and to become the greatest force in your life and to spill over into the lives of others.

Receive it prayerfully. Receive it thankfully. And don't be surprised *how* and *where* it may lead you.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.