



June 13, 2021. Mk. 4: 26-34. Ezek. 17:22-24

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### SETTING THE SCENE:

A parable challenges us to growth. If we are too far from understanding it, it leaves us dismissing it in some way or other. If we are getting close to letting its truth in, we find it nagging us until we open ourselves to its meaning. If however, we are ready, it zeroes in straight to the heart and we “know that we know”. But all the time, the parable protects our freedom. We respond according to our ability to hear. Today's text teaches that just the tiniest speck of faith, provides God with all that is needed for abundant results. This tiny seed contains within it all it needs for God's purpose. How is your shrub doing?

### Mk. 4:26-34

26 He also said, “The **kingdom of God** is as if someone would **scatter seed** on the **ground**, 27 and would **sleep** and **rise** night and day, and the **seed** would **sprout** and **grow**, he does not know how. 28 The **earth produces** of itself, first the **stalk**, then the **head**, then the **full grain** in the **head**. 29 but when the **grain** is **ripe**, at once he goes in with his **sickle**, because the **harvest** has come.” 30 He also said, With what can we **compare** the **kingdom of God**, or what **parable** will we use for it? 31 It is like a **mustard seed**, which, when **sown** upon the **ground**, is the **smallest** of all the **seeds** on earth; 32 yet when it is **sown** it **grows** up and become the **greatest** of all **shrubs**, and puts forth large **branches**, so that the **birds** of the air can make **nests** in its **shade**.” 33 With many such **parables** he spoke the word to them, as they were **able** to hear it; 34 he did not speak to them except in **parables**, but he **explained** everything in private to his disciples.

**DISCUSSION QUESTION:** What kinds of birds are finding shelter and shade in your branches of faith these days?

**PRAYER:** Lord, from the tiniest speck of faith, you bring forth a harvest of plenty. I thank you now for all those people whose ‘mustard seeds’ of faith have witnessed to me of You. Many, maybe all of them, didn't even know they were scattering seeds of faith as they went about their lives. Yet your Spirit blew them into my path and now I have the faith too. Help me as I sleep and rise up day after day to be a ‘mustard seed’ for others as well. Amen.

### WORD STUDY AND QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

**KINGDOM OF GOD:** Often translated the realm of God. That place or condition where God's will is completely lived. Jesus brings a new understanding of what God and God's realm are like.

*What do you think of when you the kingdom/realm of God? If you were to fashion an image what would you use?*

**SEED:** A seed is the future of the plant/tree. It contains all that is needed for the mature reality to come into being given proper conditions.

*Can Jesus' words be seeds of faith? What conditions do you need for those words to mature?*

**SCATTER / SOWN:** In the time of Jesus seeds were often sown by scattering them by hand.

*How are the 'seeds' of Jesus' words scattered/sown today?*

**GROUND / EARTH:** The place where the seeds/words are sown is in the ground. Our earth of space and time is that place where faith grows into its fullness.

*How is your garden growing this year?*

**SLEEP / RISE:** So much happens in life that happens as we go about just living.

*Is this a comforting thought for you? Why?*

**SPROUT / GROW:** God's process is unfolding as it should, even though we humans don't understand fully what is truly going on.

*Does this sound like your life? Do you have a sense that there is a suitable outcome for your life?*



**PRODUCES / STALK / HEAD / FULL GRAIN:** The stalk, head, and full grain, are all stages in the life of grain. The cycle is complete and now there is either seed for another harvest or food to be consumed.

*What stage in the process most accurately describes where your faith life is now? In what way are you seed for the future? Food to sustain life?*

**RIPE:** To be ripe is to be at the stage where harvesting is needed, or the product might go to waste.

*What has 'ripened' in your faith life and produced a rich harvest? Have you harvested it, or let it go to waste?*

**SICKLE:** The sickle is the tool used to cut the grain down by the harvester.

*Have you ever felt the cut of a 'sickle' in your process of growth in faith?*

**HARVEST:** The harvest is that time that is eagerly awaited after the long process of work and growth.

*Do you have the sense that when your 'harvest' time comes you will eagerly welcome it?*

**COMPARE / PARABLE:** A parable uses comparisons to help define a reality that shares similar elements but often can only partially do the task. There are usually several levels that a person can understand the parable depending on their abilities to go beyond the obvious. A parable invites, but never forces.

*Do you enjoy parables? If so, why? If not, why?*

**MUSTARD SEED:** When reaching for the tiniest of seeds, Jesus uses the mustard seed, not the great and mighty cedar often used in the Hebrew Scriptures.

*What makes this tiny seed a powerful metaphor for helping us understand God's process?*

**SMALLEST / GREATEST:** Parables 'throw two images' together. In Semitic languages the words that describe opposite extremes are often used to make their point.

*What is Jesus' point in this example?*

**GROWS:** God has chosen a process of growth to bring creation into being. Nothing comes to be except by beginning unfinished and moving towards maturity.

*Do you ever wish God had chosen another way to create? If so, why? What way would you prefer? Why?*

**SHRUBS:** A shrub is less impressive than a mighty cedar yet is often thrives in places that other trees can not.

*What might this say about God's process of creation?*

**BRANCHES:** Branches are often mentioned in Jesus' parables.

*What makes branches useful in helping you connect with the parables?*

**BIRDS:** In a time when the Gentiles were 'flocking' into the Christian communities, it seemed like all the birds of the air were being included.

*What challenges could that have presented to the Jewish Christians in the small mustard sized bush of the early church? Does the parable imply that there was room for all?*

**NESTS:** A nest is necessary in order to lay eggs and raise a future generation of birds. It also provides a place to rest.

*Is your faith community a place for you to rest as well as a place to raise the future generations of 'birds'?*

**SHADE:** Shade is life giving in the face of the relentless sun.



*What 'shades' you in your shrub (faith community)?*

**ABLE:** A parable invites you to a deeper understanding to the degree you are able at the present moment.

*How has this time of reflection enabled you to go deeper into the parables of this gospel?*

**EXPLAINED:** Jesus took his disciples aside to explain further what his parable was all about. Along the way some of the disciples 'maxed' out and dropped out. But for those who hung in there, there was richer and richer understanding of God and God's realm to be had.

*How has this guide helped you go deeper and understand more? Does this process help you to hang in there with the gospels?*

**PARALLEL TEXTS:** Mk. 4:26 // James 5:7; Mk. 4:29 // Joel 3:13; Mk. 4:30-2 // Mt. 13:31-32; Lk. 13:18-19; Dan. 4:7-14,21; Ez. 21:2-6; Mk. 4:33-34 // Mt. 13:34-35; Ps. 78:2;

**OTHER TEXTS OF THE WEEK:** Ez. 17:22-24; Ps. 92:2-3,13-16; 2 Cor. 5:6-10; Mk. 4: 26-34; Proper 6 Revised Common Lectionary: 1 Sam. 15:34-16:13; Ps. 20; 2 Cor. 5:6-17; Mk. 4:26-34;

### **SUPPORTIVE INFORMATION:**

The mustard plant was considered a noxious weed and was illegal to plant in the time of Jesus. It would encourage birds to gather in gardens which would be foolish behavior. Jesus used parables such as this to force people to think differently. A sort of koan.

Notice how myths and parables interact. Our myth is a symbol system out of which we think and operate. Everyone has a myth. We have to have our myth because it creates our world and provides our frame of reference. In contrast, a parable confronts our world and subverts it. It doesn't call for discussion, debate, or question; it is not God-as-information. Rather it is God-as-invitation-and-challenge. A parable calls us to insight and decision. A parable doesn't lead us to endless analysis; it's either a flashing insight or it's nothing. Jesus is never afraid to put things in a hard way. He's not afraid of using a word that's inevitably going to be misunderstood. He puts his truth out there; dealing with it is the listener's problem. He is saying, in effect, "Struggle with what I'm saying!" In general, Jesus doesn't spend a great deal of time qualifying his point and making sure everybody understands it clearly. As Rainer Maria Rilke writes, "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions." Richard Rohr

There are two species of mustard in the region – the "common mustard" (*Sinapis alba*) and the black mustard; the mustard mentioned in the NT was probably the latter. The NT repeatedly emphasizes the potency of this diminutive mustard seed, which measures only 1 to 1.5 mm but develops into plants measuring as tall as 6 feet...

Widoder, Bevorah Emmet. [A Biblical Spice Rack](#). Bible Review. 10/97. page 35.

"Mystical" teaching according the Bible states that the human being is known/loved by God before he or she knows/loves God (Ga. 4:9). Scripture constantly affirms the primacy of divine revelation over human searching and of grace over merit; the kingdom of God grows like a seed in the earth, even while the farmer is sleeping (Mk. 4: 26-29). To put it briefly, divine good will always comes before human good will. Pg. 336.

Olivera, Bernardo, O.C.S. O. [The Search for God: Conference, letters, and homilies](#). Kalamazoo, MI. Cistercian Pub. 2002.

When the forms of an old culture are dying, the new culture is created by a few people who are not afraid to be insecure. Rudolf Bahro

A parable is an enigma in the Aristotelian sense, a metaphoric description. Rather than describing an object or person, however, the parable, as it is employed by the gospel writers, is a description of what cannot be described in any other way: a spiritual state or event....Perhaps Jesus spoke in parables for much the same reason that Heraclitus formulated paradoxes – because the hidden connection is stronger than the apparent one. A Kingdom of God described literally can be no more than a worldly kingdom. A Kingdom of God compared to a mustard seed, however, something that it obviously is not, must be more than a worldly kingdom. Hence, parable and enigma were devices of instruction favored just as much by early Christians as by their contemporaries in the Roman schools of rhetoric.

Hoffman, David & Sharon. [Enigma, Paradox, Parable: What we can learn from what we don't know](#). Parabola. Summer 2000. Page 19.

Autopoiesis: The earth produces of itself (Greek: automatically) Mk. 4: 28. The "auto" here should not be taken to posit a "self," but rather an innate principle of the spontaneous origination of order, that is, of genesis. That is the root meaning of the word "nature," to generate or give birth. Organisms, which do have somatic selves, are self-organizing, but so are species lines, in which such organismic selves are contained. Ecosystems are spontaneously organizing: the species get arranged into interdependencies; novel niches appear and species arise to fill the. Even the planet, globally, is a prolific system. Rolston, Holmes, III. [Genes Genesis and God](#). Cambridge, UK. Cambridge Univ. Press. 1999.

In parable after parable, Jesus speaks of the “reigning of God,” using images drawn from farming and women’s work. It is not described as coming from on high down to earth; it rises quietly and imperceptibly out of the land. It is established, not by armies and military might, but by an ineluctable process of growth from below, among the common people. Its colors are not gold and scarlet and purple, but earth tones: brown, yellow, and green. Its symbolism is not masculine (kings, swords, chargers, shields, spears) but feminine (water, soil, dough, women, a home). . . .Jesus sardonically compares the reigning of God to a tiny mustard seed that grows rank and wild in hedgerow and garden, “and becomes the greatest of all . . .shrubs”! Mk. 4:30-32 par. =[Gos. Thomas](#). 20). He is, in sum, not looking for a kingdom for himself or anyone else where power can be wielded in order to *impose* God’s will on the world. He is inaugurating a domination-free society. Wink, Walter. [Engaging the Powers](#). Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN. 1992. Page 115.

We loose the seeds of mercy upon the world. They do their work. We are the bearers and sowers of the kingdom of God, not the architects. God has scattered us in the same way that we are to scatter His truth.

Jordan, Clarence. Doulos Bill. [Cotton Patch Parables of Liberation](#). Herald Press, Ontario. 1976. Page 127.

Flowers unfold slowly and gently, bit by bit in the sunshine, and a soul too must never be punished or driven, but unfolds in its own perfect timing to reveal its true wonder and beauty. (The Findhorn Garden)

No bird can fly without opening its wings, and no one can love without exposing their heart. Mark Nepo.

The One who blows the wild wind of life, who fires the blaze of being, who gives birth to the world, or who midwives it into existence does not stand over against it or rule it from afar but dwells in intimate, quickening relationship with humanity and the life of the earth. . . .Enfolding and unfolding the universe, the Spirit is holy mystery “over all and through all and in all: (Eph. 4:6) Elizabeth Johnson

No seed ever sees its flower. Zen saying

Challenge parables mean – that is, intend – to make us probe and question, ponder and wonder, discuss and debate, and, above all else, practice that gift of the human spirit known as thinking. Pg. 111.

Crossan, John Dominic. [The Power of Parable](#). NY. HaperOne. 2012.

Every happening, great and small, is a parable whereby God speaks to us, and the art of life is to get the message. Malcolm Muggeridge

#### **SUGGESTED READINGS:**

Links to all the books mentioned in this guide are on The Ark web site: [www.theark1.com](http://www.theark1.com)

Beck, Robert. Sunday Homilies: Cycle B 89-91. 2011-12. Pgs. To order contact [Carol Oberfoel](#)

Grana, Janice. [Images](#). St. Mary's College Press, Winona, MN. 1976. AWARENESS: Page 29. REFLECTIONS ON A MOMENT: Page 48.

Hays, Edward. [Twelve and One-Half Keys](#). Forest of Peace Books, Easton, KS. 1981. THE KINGS WIZARD: Pages 65-72.

Hays, Edward. [The Ethiopian Tattoo Shop](#). Forest of Peace Books, Easton, KS. THE SOUL DREAM: Pages 68-75.