

SERMON for June 16, 2018, at All Saints' Episcopal Church, Russellville, AR

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Today's gospel includes two parables, both about plants, and the first one is frustrating for me in a completely secular sense. In it, someone scatters seed on the ground and then just sleeps and rises, night and day, while the seed sprouts and grows ("he does not know how"), until the grain ripens and is ready to harvest. Before I moved here, I lived in Baton Rouge, LA, a place with black, fertile soil and daily rain, a place where you could spit a seed out the back door one evening and have a plant by morning. The luscious greenness seemed about to clap shut over your head, everything grew so fast and thick and almost without assistance. Then I moved here. And I have watched—AM WATCHING—so many plants die that I have come close to swearing off gardening altogether. This hot dry June, even my daylilies are dying without bothering to bloom first. Clearly, my efforts do not match today's parables. But, of course, these parables are not about plants at all, but rather about the kingdom of God, and therefore not only of greater depth than the thin, parched crust of dirt in my back yard, but also worthy of our focused spiritual attention.

According to Merrill Tenney, "the greatest single topic that Jesus discussed was the kingdom" (it's a major theme in Mark's gospel, referred to some 17 times [Boyce]), and "there has been an unusual amount of debate concerning its exact nature" (I will omit his lengthy list of varied speculations and assertions). I looked up the kingdom of God (often combined and equated with the kingdom of heaven) in *Nave's Topical Bible* and W. E. Vine's *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, and I welcome you to peruse those lists that we haven't time to delve into here. It's a big topic.

I want to focus today on the nature of parables in general before looking specifically at the two in today's gospel. I'm a literature professor, so concepts I deal with daily are central in parables: similes and extended metaphors, comparisons, usually descriptions of something ordinary and concrete to illustrate and explain something more complex and abstract. Jesus frequently spoke in parables (I read that there are 70 in the gospels). Sometimes they are more like allegories, in which each thing in the narrative can be equated with a specific meaning. In fact, in this chapter of Mark, we have one of those that Jesus explained in detail, a parable no doubt familiar to most of us: the parable of a sower, the different types of soil on which the seed he sowed fell, and the different outcomes of those various seeds. One of the things that intrigues me about this parable is that he told it to a large crowd, but he only explained it when the disciples asked him its meaning after they were alone. There was no explanation to the multitude. The same thing occurs with the two parables in today's gospel. Verse 34 says that "he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples."

It must have been frustrating to the excluded multitude, left to ponder the meanings of Jesus' parables, as it often is for us, for today's parables are not followed by explications. Matt Skinner compares certain parables to reflections "similar to the distortions that appear in a funhouse mirror. . . . Jesus' parables . . . have a way of reordering conventional assumptions and values. They don't explain HOW one is supposed to recognize the reign of God, but they make it clear that we will need to adopt or receive new ways of perceiving." He adds that these two specific parables "illuminate—or perhaps obfuscate . . . aspects of God's reign." The fact that Jesus leaves us with ambiguities appeals to me. My students are often frustrated by the ambiguities of literary texts, especially poetry. I cannot count the times I've been asked, "Why doesn't she just come out and SAY that?" One way I respond to that question is an attempt to

convey that complexity, depth cannot be simply stated outright. Poetry is often about love, death, God—big stuff. I often ask them what inspired the first poem they ever wrote. Typically, it's falling in love and trying to find some way to express that deep, complex, and yet common, emotion. You say, "I love you." "Yes, I know you do." "No, I LOVE YOU." "I know you do." "But you don't really understand . . ."—so you write a poem, and you use metaphors and similes.

"O my Luve's like a red, red rose  
That's newly sprung in June;  
O my Luve's like the melody  
That's sweetly play'd in tune:" (Robert Burns)

If you are Elizabeth Barrett Browning, you write this:

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.

I love thee to the depth and breadth and height

My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight  
For the ends of being and ideal grace.  
I love thee to the level of every day's  
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.  
I love thee freely, as men strive for right.  
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.  
I love thee with the passion put to use  
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.  
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose  
With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,  
Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,  
I shall but love thee better after death.

Now THAT is a way to say, "I love you." And it's not ambiguous. Jesus' parables, however, although comparable to poetry through their use of comparison, are not always so clear in their meaning. Instead, they often better fit the poet Ezra Pound's explanation of how images or symbols work in modern poetry: they evoke in the reader an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. Note the word COMPLEX. The concept of the kingdom of God is

complex. And rather than explaining His meaning, Jesus makes us work to understand that complexity.

Let's look at the first parable we read today. What new way of perceiving the kingdom of God does this parable evoke? Perhaps it is pointless to make this an allegory, to figure out who the farmer is (many people do). One interpretation equates us with the soil, by the way. Maybe part of what this parable evokes, what we might see through it, is that the kingdom of God is inevitable, that, even if we do nothing, it will grow, whether we see its development or not, and will ultimately be manifest (Skinner). The parable of the mustard seed is probably more familiar, and we have heard sermons, explications, and interpretations of its meanings many times. The tiniest thing can become the most impressive, powerful thing. The cedar tree in Ezekiel is a more impressive plant. The mustard plant, it turns out, is not impressive, at least not in the same way: it is a weed, "prolific, common, sturdy, not easily eradicated," ordinary, and, like all weeds, it takes over; as Skinner says, it "will mess with established boundaries and conventional values"; it will "get into everything" and "crowd out other concerns." The kingdom of God as a weed? And yet look again at those positive traits we just noted. Then Mark tells us another admirable quality: it shelters the birds in its shade. So does the tree in Ezekiel, but this is just a weed. As Skinner notes, perhaps this points toward a new way of perceiving greatness.

One major point I want to stress today is that we should resist the compulsion to codify all of Jesus' teachings into THE LAW, a set of clear, specific rules we are to understand and obey. As Tenney states, Jesus' teachings "were not organized around a system but around himself, and their value depends on who he is. . . . To some his teachings may seem like an unsystematic collection of unrelated sayings, but in the light of his person these sayings take on new meaning. They are the flashing facets of a divine personality" (223). My father used to say

that the Bible is not a rulebook, but rather a book of etiquette. Perhaps that's another ambiguity, but it is worth pondering, as I continue to do.

Last Sunday, Mother Terri recommended a book about Biblical metaphors that I promptly ordered and read, *Wearing God*, by Lauren F. Winner. Winner notes that there are hundreds of images of God in the Bible, adding that “this surfeit of images” functions to “rule out literalism,” and that “each image holds a different way (maybe many different ways) into our life with God” (9). She quotes Carolyn Jane Bohler: “To be useful, a metaphor for God needs to evoke [two] reactions AT THE SAME TIME: ‘Oh, yes, God IS like that,’ and ‘Well, no, God is NOT quite like that’” (11). The same can be said of metaphors of the kingdom of God. And yet we refer to it every time we pray the Lord’s prayer. We ask that God’s kingdom will come to earth as it is in heaven. What are we asking for? And how do we participate in making that happen? Earlier I implied that the first parable today seems to relieve us of responsibility in bringing that kingdom to earth, that it will happen on its own. But I would like to add another dimension to that reading. We also say in that prayer, “for thine is the kingdom.” One way to understand that assertion is that HE is the kingdom. To repeat Tenney, the value of Jesus’ teachings depends on WHO HE IS. And it is our responsibility to learn who He is. He explained his parables to the disciples in private, when they were alone. And we learn in private, in our personal relationship with Him, the meaning of the kingdom of God. It is our closeness to Him that reveals Him to us AS the kingdom of God. Some readings claim that the kingdom of God will only come when Jesus returns to earth, in the Second Coming. But we can daily enter into that kingdom through our closeness to Him. In doing so, we become representations, representatives of that kingdom on earth, giving shelter like the tree in Ezekiel, like the mustard plant in Mark. In verse 11, Jesus tells the disciples, “To you has been given the secret of the

kingdom of God.” As we, through that private relationship with and knowledge of Him, become His kingdom on earth, we reveal that kingdom so that others can enter into the mystery, the relationship that includes them in that kingdom as well.

I want to conclude with a quotation from Augustine (included in Winner’s book):

God becomes all to thee; for He is to thee the whole of these things which thou lovest. If thou regardest things visible, neither is God bread, nor is God water, nor is God this light, nor is He garment nor house. For all these things are visible, and single separate things. What bread is, water is not; and what a garment is, a house is not; and what these things are, God is not, for they are visible things. God is all this to thee: if thou hungerest, He is bread to thee; if thou thirstest, He is water to thee: if thou art in darkness, He is light to thee: for He remains incorruptible. If thou art naked, He is a garment of immortality to thee, when this corruptible shall put on incorruption, and this mortal shall put on immortality. All things can be said of God, and nothing is worthily said of God. Nothing is wider than this poverty of expression. Thou seekest a fitting name for Him, thou canst not find it; thou seekest to speak of Him in any way soever, thou findest that He is all. (237-38)

Amen.

