

A SERMON BY THE REVEREND ELIZABETH F. KEELER

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost



17 June 2018

Ezekiel 17:22-24
Psalm 92:1-4,11-14
2 Corinthians 5:6-10,[11-13],14-17
Mark 4:26-34

Well, it finally feels like we are beginning to slip into the familiar rhythms of summer. The sun is high and bright in the sky, the days are long, schools out, we are back in our beloved chapel garden and... and we are beginning to hear parable stories in our Gospel readings.

Now the simplest way to think about parables is by first remembering that we all know plenty about stories and storytelling. We know, of course, that story telling is as old as humankind. Stories can delight, sometimes they scare, they bring people together creating community and history, sometimes stories offer comfort, at other times they impart wisdom, even challenging us to think differently. I'm sure you can think of a story that's been meaningful in your life – it might be a family story that's been told and re-told so many times that everyone knows it. The point is we all carry stories in our hearts and minds as part of who we are – as part of our very essence.

Jesus taught using stories we call parables. It's a brilliant way to teach because parables use metaphorical language allowing people to understand difficult concepts more easily. Jesus is a parable specialist in large part because he uses that which is familiar to guide listeners into complex and important truths. Jesus' parables are among the Bible's most well-known stories: The Good Samaritan, The Prodigal Son, The Lost Sheep. These are stories that Christians know as well as they do their own family stories.

Today I'd like for us think about Jesus and his parables by first acknowledging how extraordinary it is that we know and still share so many of the stories Jesus told. It's remarkable really that a Christ Church 7th grader can easily re-tell a story, like the Good Samaritan, that actually originated right out of the mouth of Jesus of Nazareth. So let's begin my appreciating just how significant that two-thousand year old story telling link is!

In Mark's Gospel today we are given two back-to-back parables, the second of which ranks in the top ten most familiar – the parable of the Mustard Seed. It's a favorite because the imagery is fantastic and there isn't a Sunday School teacher alive who hasn't brought in a little bottle of mustard seeds to help illustrate the story. When I came to Christ Church there was a little card that hung above the desk in the clergy vesting room with a tiny mustard seed glued to it. It kept falling down so now it's in my office where it still serves as inspiration with its message that the God's work can seem tiny, almost invisible, and yet it carries the power and potential to change lives and the world.

Now while the parable of the Mustard Seed is wonderfully familiar, the story that precedes it in our

Gospel today is less familiar. The reason might be that this first seed parable is only found in Mark's Gospel, unlike the Mustard Seed, which is told in all three synoptic - Matthew, Mark and Luke.

As a reminder, here's the first parable: "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, 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."

The image is agrarian and both gentle and powerful at the same time. We scatter seeds and then go about our lives, sleeping and waking, waking and sleeping day after day, and while we are about our busy lives something astonishing is happening to some of those tiny seeds - wherever and whatever they may be. Those seeds are growing and changing - first deep within the earth and then visibly above ground. Through layers of dirt, or sometimes asphalt and concrete, the growth pushes up through whatever is in its way. The parable continues to offer that at some point the growth is noticed and then the next step is clear, because when the grain is ready it's time for action.

This first little parable is just as full of possibilities, of course, as the Mustard Seed one. Jesus doesn't waste words. I would encourage you to trust your own instincts about the meaning of the seeds but I'll offer a few possibilities. Remember that our point of reference can vary but it's usually God's Kingdom, or God's work in the world, or even our faith in relation to God. Just like nature and seeds, God's work may sometimes seem imperceptible. But that never means it isn't happening, it happens in spite of our tendencies to be distracted. And, God's work is constant, always pushing ahead even if we feel stuck. Furthermore it is inevitable and there is nothing as powerful, and nothing that can stop God's work. In addition, the parable reminds us to have both patience and hope. Seeds must be silent in the ground, there are dormant winter months just as there are high growth seasons. So it must be with God's work. Finally, there are and always will be harvests, and so we must be attentive and be ready to respond.

Just like stories, many parables are fun, and like puzzles they can stretch us to try out different fits and we can work and rework them over and over. In these summer months, as you are spending time with your own stories, spend time with Jesus by entering into a few of the parable stories he told. Some theologians have suggested Jesus himself is the real and final parable - God's parable - teaching and gently drawing and guiding us deeper and ever closer into the very heart of God.

Amen.



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