

Gospel - Mark 3: 20-35

Pentecost 3

Sermon 6.13.21

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Wouldn't you like to have been included in those meetings where Jesus explains things? Where he explains everything?

Perhaps it would not be any different than now. As I mentioned two Sundays ago, the disciples, when listening to Jesus, often "did not understand; its meaning was concealed. And they were afraid to ask him" (Luke 9:45). Sometimes the New Testament records instances where Jesus explains the meaning of his sayings; sometimes not.

In today's reading we simply have the two parables without explanation. So we are left to think.

Jesus says they are about the kingdom of God or God's reign. We know that God reigns with justice and also with mercy, love and forgiveness. Jesus says that the reign of God, like **the earth, produces of itself.**

I think I would like to begin this morning where we left off two weeks ago when we talked about how Nicodemus soon dropped away from asking questions simply to listen to Jesus tell about God's love. It is an important reason why we gather—to hear it again and feel and experience God's own intimate care and love. So please take a brief moment just to quiet your thoughts and receive for yourself all the tenderness of God's nearness and unqualified acceptance.

Thank you. The amazing point about today's two parables is that God's kingdom grows and flourishes, develops and spreads, without any much action or decision on our part.

Not to say we don't have an important role to play. We must sow the seed; we must reap the harvest. We must cooperate with the process by intention and action.

But especially we get to enjoy the flourishing, abundant growth happening all by itself right in front of our eyes.

According to Jesus "the earth produces of itself"—in stages—"first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head." Likewise a tiny mustard seed grows into a mighty sheltering "shrub."

Google says that "mustard bushes reach an average mature height of between 6 and 20 feet with a 20-foot spread, although exceptional plants can reach 30 feet tall under ideal conditions."

They also yield a distinctive, clover-like smell. With all their bushiness and sweet fragrance, you can well imagine why all kinds of birds may be drawn in to build their homes. In a similar way the prophet Ezekiel speaks of God's kingdom as this massive, spreading cedar tree prominently planted at the top of the mountains, drawing all nations into its boughs.

Also the psalmist sings aloud of righteous ones whose lives flourish like great palms or cedars of Lebanon.

I think too about the prophet Daniel who anticipates God's kingdom first as a crushing stone, growing then into a mountain, growing then to fill the whole earth (2:35). They are all metaphors for the growth of God's reign. Justice, mercy, love and forgiveness are uncontrollable and unstoppable.

A couple of theological terms: first is "common grace," which is creation grace or natural grace, the grace of nature—life and health, breath and vitality, sunshine and rain, nighttime and daytime, four seasons, and abundant resources at our immediate disposal for sustenance and human love and connection.

Can anything stand in the way of these? Only our own mortality, I suppose, or limited thinking. But common grace, which begins with life itself, just keeps on extending without relent.

Another related term is “prevenient grace,” which precedes all human decision. Before ever we can know or act or think, the love of God is wooing us, the will of God is drawing us, the desire of God pursuing us, the gift of God freeing us, the activity of God empowering us—ever present, wild and free, and again, uncontrollable, unstoppable.

As Jesus describes in his parables, God’s reign of justice, mercy, love and forgiveness is everything alike to common grace and prevenient grace. It is at hand, right in front of you, uncontrollable, unstoppable, as I say; self-replicating, growing, extending, producing and sheltering. God’s reign is the blessing that covers the entire earth and humankind in particular.

Just noticing the grace of God’s kingdom everywhere and everywhere at work is an important activity on our part. Jesus commands us to look around and observe natural patterns of birds in the sky and lilies in the field. They all are fed and clothed by the Father’s loving care, irrespective of anxious striving. God’s kingdom just keeps on unfolding before us all by itself. Moreover, the writer of I Timothy declares how God “richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (6:17).

Arguably, enjoyment and thanksgiving are related ideas.

Think about your blessings that are everywhere around you: water, food, clothing, shelter, warmth, family, education, guidance, labor, leisure, healing, health, protection, purpose, freedom, personality, character, loving relationships, service, our church—to name but 20.

Or else think about what the hymn-writer has said,

*Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide;
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!
Great is Thy faithfulness!*

Whenever you think about all these blessings, your sense of enjoyment of them grows. What you appreciate in thanksgiving tends to appreciate in measure.

I’m not saying you don’t have trouble. But even with all you may go through, Christ rightly affirms that your life in your Father’s eyes is richer and better than “Solomon in all his glory.”

So it is good to give pause, take account and offer thanks. Giving thanks is at the very heart of our practice of Eucharist. Indeed, “Eucharist” means thanks.

In the “Great Thanksgiving” we tell the story of God’s creation or redemption, and with saints and angels we offer thanks.

We rehearse the scene of the Last Supper and recall Christ’s words of institution, and we offer thanks.

We pray recalling, and we pray invoking, and we pray in supplication, and we offer thanks.

From beginning to end we offer thanks. Because “it is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere, to give thanks to our Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.”

Have you noticed that the practice of thanking changes your life for the better? It changes your outlook. Dr. Wayne Dyer wrote, “When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at will change.” Giving thanks and practicing gratitude forces the eyes of our mind to change the way we see.

You may have heard me say that having a positive mental attitude does not guarantee a positive life outcome, immediately or otherwise.

However, experience shows having a negative mental attitude guarantees pretty much an immediate negative life outcome. So positive is always better, always.

It is also a good prayer practice to say thank you, always.

Thank you Jesus for . . . my life, my health, my job, my joy, my children, my friends, my church. . . The list can go on forever. Write your thanksgivings down on paper. “Count your blessings. Name them one by one. And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.”

When we are grateful our creative mental capacity expands. We can see the big picture of things. We wake and sleep in peace knowing God is in control, ever growing all things according to God’s own timetable and plan.

When we are stressed or fearful, our mind turns in on itself and our vision of things collapses. Our vision of time collapses. We are apt to act in counter-productive or even dangerous ways.

As a boy my parents used to take me camping along the Wash-ington coastline, particularly at Kalaloch, where sun-bleached drift logs pile high along sandy stretches.

One of my favorite sports was simply to let myself be carried along by incessant waves of the rising, incoming tide. It was rollicking and joyous; I spent multiplied hours up to my chest and neck, and the rushing briny foam was my only water toy.

But I was repeatedly warned against playing in the surf when the water was waning and there was danger of “undertow.”

I did not understand undertow, and I imagined the ebbing salt water could somehow cause my toes to curl up under my feet and stifle my ability to control my legs.

Later on I grasped it as some kind of an underwater vacuum that could grab me by the legs and suck me down.

Their point was important. Nature is powerful and not to be lightly esteemed. She is a pleasant, happy friend and ally when properly understood and cooperated with and stewarded, but she can be dangerous and foreboding when she is not.

On the wall of our shared family summer home there once was an embroidered needlepoint of cresting white caps and a listing sailboat. The inscribed prayer reads, “Dear God, be good to me. The sea is so wide, and my boat is so small.”

For God to answer that prayer, it’s best for us to go along with the flow of the winds and waves and not to go against them or resist.

Making the right allowances for nature’s incredible forces, we can “lead, follow or get out of the way.” But especially we can “enjoy the journey.”

So with wonder, joy, enjoyment and amazement, let's be sure to notice and enjoy God's reign unfolding and expanding right before our eyes. I recently asked the Vestry to provide a quick SWOT assessment of St David's. SWOT stands for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Here are some of our strengths:

- Open-hearted and welcoming
- Deep faith; love of Christ, church and family
- Strong, traditional music; services well done
- Desire to grow and not give up
- Bonding fellowship; caring friendships
- Loyal, passionate leaders
- Long-term members who consistently support
- Established history and traditions; longevity
- Well known in the community
- Available physical space, especially the education wing

Just look at all these beautiful plants we have growing in our fields! The sun rises and falls; we sleep, we wake; and so we grow, we don't know how. The Holy Farmer patiently waits for the fullness of life to be revealed, for the fullness of promise to be revealed. So we wait also, assured, expectant, thankful; because we know that more and even better things are growing up ahead. Amen.