

"To What Shall We Liken the Kingdom of God?"

I've recently been involved in a lot of sowing. This year, I've planted tomatoes, beans, kale, and collard greens all from seed. It's exciting to check them each day, water them regularly, and wait for them to sprout up. Some of them have had great results, surprising me how quickly they have popped up, others have been slower moving than I would like. But at the end of the day, there are only certain things I can do to make them grow, and I have to trust that nature will take its course and produce the plants. And of course I know that it's not ultimately nature that is taking its course but it is really God who grows and upholds even these little plants as they grow in this world.

And so as I have been involved in planting and taking care of these seeds, these parables in our passage for today seem all the more relevant to me. And if you too have ever been involved in any sort of planting and gardening, I'd like to remind you of those experiences as we begin to think about this passage.

For this passage has three related parables; parables about seeds; about sowing, and growing, and harvesting. Of course, these parables are not ultimately about farming. They are about the kingdom of God. Jesus is using these parables to teach us something about the kingdom which he had come to announce. Last week we looked at this same passage, but our focus last week was on the purpose of parables, in general. We saw how Jesus explained the dual use of parables - that for some they serve to veil the truth and for others to reveal it. But today, we'll focus more specifically on these three parables about seeds and look at what Jesus is telling us about the kingdom of God in these parables.

And as we look at each of these parables, I want us to consider them from two perspectives. First, from a more internal, inward, perspective. What do these parables tell us about the kingdom of God's impact on us internally as individuals? What are they telling us about our growth as Christians in this kingdom? How does this relate to us being disciples in this kingdom? Secondly, I'd like us to consider these parables from an outward, external perspective. In other words, these parables tell us about how the kingdom of God is to affect others. It tells us that the kingdom of God is not something that is to come into us and just remain there. There is a militant aspect of the kingdom. The kingdom message is to go forth to the world. And as we see these parables talking about how God is doing that, we realize that we as his disciples are involved in that outward expansion as well. And so we'll also consider these parables from that outward perspective - how are these parables calling us to bring God's word of the kingdom to the world? How are we to participate in the sowing and the harvest of the kingdom? So that's our plan for today. We'll look at each of these three parables about seeds, and look at each from both an inward and an outward perspective.

The first parable that I'd like us to look at is the last one in our passage for today: the parable of the mustard seed in verses 30-32. I think this is a great parable to start with today because it reminds us that we must ever be enlarging our perspective on God's kingdom and on his kingdom work. Jesus said in verse 30, "To what shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what parable shall we picture it? It is like a mustard seed which, when it is sown on the ground, is smaller than all the seeds on earth; but when it is sown, it grows up and becomes greater than all herbs, and shoots out large branches, so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade."

Now some people miss the point of this parable by getting stuck on the fact that mustard seed is not scientifically the smallest seed on the entire planet. But Jesus is speaking proverbially here, and not trying to make a botanical claim. The point is that a mustard seed is seen proverbially as the smallest seed, and yet look how big and significant of a plant that comes from this tiny seed. Jesus points out how the birds will even make their nests and find shade in this tree. The same birds that would probably quickly gobble up a single mustard seed, and not even be filled, can find their home and refuge in a vast mustard plant that came from just one seed.

The point of this parable seems pretty clear. Jesus says that the kingdom of God is like this mustard seed. Remember, that Jesus came to declare the coming of the kingdom. And here Jesus teaches that the kingdom appears small and insignificant at first. Just compare the kingdom of God with the kingdoms of the world. At that time, the Roman Empire, was the dominant power, with no apparent subjection to God. In the Old Testament, the kingdom of God had been manifested in types and shadows through the nation of Israel. But Israel at that time appeared weak in the eyes of the nations, sitting under Roman occupation. The kingdom of God, to the degree that it had been manifested in Israel, must have appeared tiny and weak to the world.

And though Jesus had entered the world, proclaiming the imminent coming of the kingdom, and even though he had been attracting a wide following, there was still not much outward glory being seen. Most probably thought Jesus' words were proven wrong when he went to the cross. And yet it is at the cross where the truth pictured in this parable of the mustard seed really begins to be seen. At the cross, most would have seen that as Jesus' defeat. Most would think it is the climax of his insignificance. And yet it is there at the cross where he gains the greatest victory. And from there, from his apparently insignificant death, he sends out his small band of apostles to testify not only to his resurrection, but to continue to bring the message of the coming kingdom to the world.

And already we see the kingdom growing. Already we see God's word going to the nations. Already we see believers sprouting up all over. God's kingdom is advancing. In many ways we see it visibly advancing, and yet in some ways what we see visibly at this point can be deceiving. For the kingdom is ultimately advancing right now on earth in a spiritual way. The kingdom of God is not advancing in geo-political ways. It is advancing in the hearts of believers who are united together as one church in Christ. Though there are visible expressions of this through the church as an institution, we recognize that even more fundamentally the church is an organism that is growing throughout the world. And yet the kingdom will even be seen visibly, with all its glory, at the Lord's return. For the gospel advance will continue until the kingdom is brought to its consummation upon the Lord's return. At that point, God's kingdom rule will be visibly over all. At that point, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

So there is a surprising, unexpected, nature of the kingdom and its growth, and Jesus pictures that here with this parable of the mustard seed. So, then, consider this parable's application to us both from an inward and outward perspective. Inwardly, we see how the growth of the kingdom happens in our own lives. Our faith begins by God's kingdom word intruding into our lives. We are born again and enabled to believe only because of the kingdom power at work in our hearts. And as we begin to turn in faith, we see our sinfulness, our total depravity, and our hearts long to be like Christ. We long to be holy. We long to be righteous. Our Christian living seems so small compared to God's glory. Our obedience and

sanctification seem so meager. And yet God's kingdom power and word continues to grow us and shape us. Yes, we sometimes stumble, but God keeps growing us. In this world we don't find perfection, but when he returns he will complete the kingdom work in our lives and will make us fully conformed to the image of Christ, no longer able to sin. So from an inward perspective, we can see the kingdom's marvelous growth even pictured in our life.

And from an outward perspective, we recognize that God is at work to grow his kingdom, and that he has called us his church to be a part of that advancement. And so as we seek to advance the kingdom in his name, we must have his perspective. The kingdom is growing, even though the growth may seem insignificant at times from the world's eyes. Think about that for us here at Trinity. The world would tell us that we are a small insignificant number. The world would tell us that we have no hope for bringing the Christian faith to Marin. We are so tiny, what can we do, people might say. And from a worldly perspective they would be right. But Jesus reminds us in this parable that great things can come from small beginnings. Our little church is an extension of the kingdom of God. It is with certainty that the kingdom will ultimately fill the earth. We don't know the timing. It may not be through us; through our labors. But may we be convinced of its ultimate certainty, and so may that give us *great* confidence as we do the work of ministry here in Novato. Small numbers are no problem for God. In fact, Scripture shows a great love for doing amazing things with small numbers, so that all the glory can rightly go to God and not to humans! If God chooses to advance the kingdom in and through us here in Novato, while we are here, then we know that it will only be because of God's kingdom power! Only he will get the glory! If you find yourself doubting what God could do here in our small congregation, then I challenge you to pray that God would enlarge your perspective of him and his kingdom!

The second parable that I would like us to look at today is the parable of the sower in verses 1-9, along with its inspired interpretation in verses 13-20. This is the parable where the sower sows seeds, and in the process, his seed falls into four different places: the wayside, the stony ground, the thorny ground, and the good ground. Of course, only the good ground produces a healthy plant with an abundant harvest. Jesus goes on to explain how the seed represents the word, and how each of the four places represent a different kind of person, with the first three ultimately rejecting the word, and the fourth receiving and accepting the word and bearing Christian fruit. Last week we looked at the big picture found in this parable - that there are some who reject God's word and some who respond. I'd like to consider the details more of this parable, and think about the reasons why us and others often resist receiving God's word.

Look at the first unfruitful place where the seed falls in this parable: the wayside. In verse 15, Jesus says that the picture of the bird eating the seed from the wayside is a picture of how Satan comes into some people's hearts and snatches away the word that was sown. Notice the word "immediately" in verse 15. Jesus says that Satan does this immediately to these people. And yet just because Satan is given the credit here for taking away the seed, doesn't take away man's responsibility. Though Satan may deceive, accuse, and try to devour us, never does Scripture take away our accountability for our actions. Rather, man, when he falls prey to Satan, usually does so because he trusts in Satan's word instead of God's word. That's what I believe is at the root of this response. If Satan and his word is allowed to rule in our hearts, there will be no place for God's word.

The second unfruitful place where the seed falls in this parable is the stony ground. Jesus uses the word "immediately" again to describe this response, twice in verses 16-17. He says that the stony ground represents those people who *immediately* receive the word, but then *immediately* stumble when troubles come. The

troubles that Jesus describes are tribulations and persecutions. The tribulations probably refer to more general afflictions that are common to all mankind, whereas the persecutions seem to refer more to ways we are afflicted by the world because we are Christian. This is basically describing a temporary faith that someone has, who when the first sign of trouble comes, they jump ship. This temporary faith usually stems from some lack of true understanding of what God's word is really all about. For example, some people become Christian, and become very excited about their newfound Christian life, because they think it will solve all their problems. Maybe their life was a mess before and so they think that by going to church and saying the right things that God will be pleased with them and then there will never be any more problems in their life. But of course God's word doesn't promise that. Jesus tells us that we will have trouble in this world. And so when people with such misplaced faith experience their first hardship or persecution, it is no wonder why they immediately turn and reject their Christian faith. From their perspective, it didn't deliver what they thought it was promising.

The third unfruitful place where the seed falls in this parable is the thorny ground. This group is also made up of people who fall away after initially receiving the word. But these people do not fall away because of afflictions and persecutions, but because of the love of the world. There are things in these people's hearts that preoccupy them. This might be love of money, or love of fame, or love of the flesh. There are lusts in their hearts that are more important to them than God's word. They are not willing to heed Christ's call to store up heavenly treasures instead of earthly ones. Their hope is not a heavenly hope but an earthly hope, and so their faith turns out to be only a temporary, counterfeit faith.

The fourth place where the seed falls, of course, is the good ground. Jesus says this represents those people with whom the word bears fruit. These people receive the word, and accept it. They respond to it and seek to live it out. And the word does not remain stagnant in them, but it ultimately bears fruit in their lives. Of course, this should tell us that the credit for this fruit does not come from us. The fruit is a result of the sown word. It is the power of the kingdom at work inside us. And we see evidence of this today actually in our service. Today we will witness the profession of faith of three of our covenant youth. Their profession of faith, after having grown up in a covenant family, is a testimony to the word of God bearing fruit in their lives.

And so from an inward perspective, we can apply this parable of the sower to us by realizing the obstacles that are prone in our hearts to keep us from God's word. Now if we are ultimately those for whom the seed falls in the good ground, those whom God's word bears fruit, we can find comfort in knowing that these other distractions will not have final victory in our hearts. And yet that doesn't mean that such threats are removed from our lives completely. No, in fact we are called to make our calling and election sure. We are to strive to work against the threats of Satan. We are to stand firm against tribulation and persecution. We are to set our mind on things that are above and not on earthly things. We are to seek to understand and live out God's word more and more! We are to look for the word to bring God's kingdom power into our lives -- that power which works in us the spiritual fruit which God wants us to have!

And from an outward perspective, we can apply this parable in that we must see the importance to share God's word with others. Even though this parable tells us that many who are given the word will not receive it, we still are called to give it to everyone. You see who is the sower here? In an ultimate sense the sower in this parable refers to Christ. Christ is the one who has come to bring the message of the kingdom. He calls us to faith and repentance. He sows the word in people's

hearts. And yet, as the church, we are called to carry out Christ's kingdom work. And so we the church, are by extension, the sowers. And if in this parable we see Christ sowing seeds everywhere, even among those places where his word will be rejected, we too must do the same thing. This is about the free offer of the gospel. The free offer of the gospel means that we proclaim God's word to all, even though many will not truly receive it. We sow God's word amidst various responses, and look for God to bring that growth.

That brings us to our third and last parable for today: the parable of the growing seed in verses 26-29. Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how. For the earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head. But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

The emphasis in this parable is not on the human sower, but on the mysterious nature of the way seeds grow. The sower plants the seed, and though I'm sure he tends to it, the parable doesn't mention that. The parable emphasizes how unbeknownst to the sower, the seed sprouts and grows and yields a harvest. The work is done somehow between the seed and the soil, without the sower really knowing how it all happens. This reminds us that it is God who is the one behind the growing - of earthly crops, but also of spiritual ones! This parable is about the kingdom of God. God is advancing the kingdom, growing the word in people throughout the world. He is growing fruit in people through his word. And so from an inward perspective, as the word grows and bears fruit in our lives, it is God who is to be praised. And from an outward perspective, we must rely on God to make our ministry effective as we share the word with others. I think of Paul in 1 Cor 3. When he describes his ministry among the Corinthians, he gave glory to God for their growth. He acknowledged how he planted the seed of the word in the Corinthians, and how Apollos watered that seed, but it was God who gave the growth. That is true in all the ministry of the church. As we share God's word with others, we participate in the sowing process, but ultimately it is God who brings the growth and thus God who is to be praised!

Notice one other thing about this parable. The sower in this parable is doing a very important thing. He is watching and waiting. He may not know how or why the seed grows, but he does apparently know the right time for the harvest. For when the grain ripens, it says in verse 29 that he "immediately" harvests it. If you have ever done any growing of fruits or vegetables, you'll find that timing is everything. For many crops, there is a sweet spot for harvesting. If you pick things too early or too late, they won't be as good. I just planted corn and have been researching when to harvest it, and find that that is definitely the case for corn. If you pick it too early, the sugars haven't developed and it's not sweet. If you wait too long, the sugars turn to starch, and then it's not sweet either.

And so the picture of this parable shows us that the harvest will happen at just the right time by the prudent farmer. In the same way, Jesus is speaking about the harvest for the kingdom of God. That harvest will happen at just the right time. Interestingly, Jesus words in verse 29 allude back to Joel 3:13. In Joel 3:13, there are very similar words used about the harvest being ripe and putting it to the sickle. Yet in Joel chapter 3, the imagery is being used to describe the final judgment against the pagan nations. Here in Mark the same imagery appears to be positive, to refer to the good fruit grown by God in those who belong to his kingdom. So, Jesus' reference back to Joel 3 really brings out the meaning of this parable. Ultimately, this parable looks to Christ's return at the final judgment, which is a positive event for believers and a terrible event for non-believers. At

that time, Christ will return to harvest those who are his and bring to judgment those who are not. And so the harvest in this parable looks toward the end of history, where Jesus, the Lord of the Harvest, will return, at just the right time, to usher in the consummated kingdom. At that time, the crop will be harvested and the chaff will be thrown out.

And so from an inward perspective, this emphasis on the harvest calls us to look inwardly at our fruit. As we see God growing this fruit in our lives, we should constantly be reminded of his return. Every spiritual fruit that grows in us, reminds us that Christ is coming and will not delay. He will come at just the right time that has been divinely appointed. And so we must watch for the harvest!

And yet from an outward perspective, our watching for the harvest, means that we must participate in the harvest even now! Jesus said in Luke 10:2, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." Jesus used this same imagery of the harvest to our situation here and now. We are to be harvesting the spiritual fruit that is before us right now! We do that in light of the final harvest. In other words, God is preparing people to hear the gospel. He is calling us to go to them, share the gospel with them, and reap a harvest. Already, we can participate in the harvest. Yes, it is ultimately Christ who will reap in that final harvest, but in advance of that, we are to be out there harvesting souls for Jesus!

Saints of God, these parables in our passage for today remind us of God's work. They remind us that God is the one active in bringing his kingdom rule to the world. It is his kingdom. He is the ultimate sower of his word. He is the one who brings the growth. He is the ultimate harvester. We are the recipients. We are the ones evangelized to and disciplined through his Word and work. And yet, as we are brought into the kingdom, we find that we take on some of these roles on God's behalf. We, as the church, become the evangelists and disciplers. And so that is why I have been having us apply these parables to us this morning from both an inward and outward perspective. Inwardly, God's kingdom is coming to us through God's work in our lives and by the power of his word. Outwardly, he then calls us to bring his word to others, and to participate in the evangelism and discipleship of others.

And so to summarize the inward perspective of these parables: We must look for God's growth in our lives. We must strive for the abundant harvest of 30, 60, and 100 fold. Jesus says that this fruit is a result of the word bearing fruit in our lives. And so if we want a greater crop of spiritual fruit in our lives, then we need to be in his word. We live in a time in history where this is so easy! Think about this in ages past. People didn't use to have their own bibles. They had to go to the local place of worship and hear the word read and preached. I hope you all will continue to do that as well; but we also have the benefit of easily having our own personal bible at home. Many of us probably have several. If there is a medical reason that impairs your reading, they have large print bibles. If that doesn't work, they have audio bibles. You can put it on your ipod. You can play it in your car. Bibles are in countless languages and various versions. And of course, the church and its leaders are here to help you understand God's word better. So, if you are not satisfied with your current spiritual growth and maturity, a first place to look at is your diet of God's word. Are you regularly feeding on the wealth of Scripture that you have readily before you? Use the resources God has placed before you! Look for the growth that he has called us to! And we praise the Lord that this harvest of 30, 60, and 100, is actually an eschatological note. In other words, this is how we as God's children will be found when Christ's return. This is a promise that God will work a harvest in the saints which he'll reap when he returns.

And so to summarize the outward perspective of these parables: We are called to be involved in the evangelism and discipleship of the church. We need to give the word to the world. Remember the free offer of the gospel! Christ offers freely to everyone the good news of salvation in him. As Christ's ambassadors we are to be offering the gospel to everyone. We are to engage in the harvest. And we are not only to make converts, in the sense that we are not only to bring the basic gospel to people just to get a decision and then move on. Yes, we are to call people to turn in faith and repentance. But that is the start of a lifelong process of growth for these new converts. And so we are to be involved in the ongoing nurture, as well, of new converts. We are not to be focused on just planting the seed, but also cultivating it and tending to it, and watching it grow. We are to be looking for fruit to be produced in those who come into the church. And so we must be involved in the two-fold task of evangelism and discipleship that the church is engaged in.

Now keep in mind that your ability to participate in the evangelism and discipleship of others, will vary based on your gifts and spiritual maturity. For example, someone who is a brand new Christian isn't going to be able to be a teacher and counselor of others. If you have a medical condition that limits your activity, that might limit what actions you can do to serve in the church. If your financial situation is very tight, you won't be able to contribute financially as much as others to the work of the church. Not everyone is called to the ordained offices: not everyone has the gifts and calling of a pastor, elder, or deacon. But that doesn't mean that you don't participate in the ministry of the church. Find ways to serve. If you don't know of any ways, ask me, or the elders, or others, what are some ways that you can serve!

And I thank the Lord for all the ways so many of the members of this church have been serving. Let us all persevere in this ministry of the word that God has called us to. And as we do so, may we say Maranatha - Come Lord Jesus, come! Come, oh Lord of the Harvest! Amen.

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