

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The gospel of St. Mark contains just a few parables, but the ones that are there really count, and this one concludes an extended string of them, beginning in Mark 3:23. Taken together, this collection of parables creates the context for experiencing the continuing ministry of Jesus as the inaugurator of the elusive yet inevitable reign of God.

Parables are comparisons. They are meant to cast two things alongside one another to provide analogy, contrast, or reflection -- usually a reflection similar to the distortions that appear in a funhouse mirror. The parables of Jesus have a way of reordering conventional assumptions and values. They do not 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.

Mark introduces the two parables in Mark 4:26-32 with explicit mention of “the kingdom of God” which either illuminate, or perhaps confuse, aspects of God’s reign. In both of these stories, Jesus speaks about seeds. The use of seeds as imagery in this was a common metaphor for formation and education in ancient contexts, and used in this case to indicate that God’s new order will take root and eventually come to fruition, whether people desire it or not.

As for the first parable...the seed growing on its own...no other gospel contains this parable. Probably because it is boring. Its plot has all the suspenseful drama of an ordinary elementary-school life sciences textbook. There are no surprises. Everything proceeds according to plan. Jesus simply speaks about seeds and what they are supposed to do. They grow and produce. Moreover, they grow and produce without your help or your intricate knowledge of germination or photosynthesis or palea, thank you very much.

In other words, the reign of God will take root -- whether in the world, in imperial society, or in someone’s heart, Jesus does not specify. It will grow gradually and automatically (the New Revised Standard Version renders *automate* in Mark 4:26 as what the earth does “on its own”). It will grow perhaps so subtly that you will not even notice, until at last it produces its intended fruit.

The inevitability and mystery of the seed’s maturation into a plant that eventually is harvested provide a vital counterpoint to the more famous parable that dominates Mark Chapter 4, a parable about sowing seeds in various soils. In that parable, so many seeds fail to bear fruit that one might question God’s commitment to seeing the reign of God blossom. But the simple parable heard this morning offers a counterbalance and reassurance in the face of such concerns: it is the nature of God’s reign to grow and to manifest itself. That is just what it does. God’s reign, like a seed, must grow, even if untended and even if its gradual expansion is nearly impossible to detect.

Compared to that parable’s matter-of-factness, the story of the mustard seed reads like a dense

novella. At first glance, it reaffirms things people have already learned about God's reign: something very small will eventually morph into something much larger; also, something that appears obscure and insignificant will turn into something public and grand. Yet there is more: the reign of God will not just grow for the sake of looking pretty, but creatures will find that it provides them shelter and security.

Those are all important points, but they cannot capture the real energy in this parable. The parable's punch comes in at least two funny things Jesus says.

First, God's reign is not like any ordinary seed. In some ways it resembles a *mustard* seed, which is not the kind of crop most people would sow. Where Jesus lived, mustard was prolific...like a common and sturdy weed. It could pop up almost anywhere and start multiplying. Some of Jesus' listeners must have groaned or chuckled. Imagine him speaking today of thistles or ground-ivy. But *bigger*. And more useful, since mustard has a range of medicinal qualities. In any case, the reign of God apparently is not much of a cash crop. Yet *it grows*. It is not easily eradicated. Good luck keeping it out of your well manicured garden or your farmland. Better be careful what you pray for when you say, "Your kingdom come..."

Second, the fully grown mustard plant, probably the species *brassica nigra* in Galilee, was described by Jesus as "the greatest of all shrubs." At this point, some of his listeners probably snorted and blew milk out of their noses. Google the words "*brassica nigra*" and judge for yourself. It can grow dense but it is hardly magnificent. Jesus must be grinning as he speaks. He is not aiming to impart insights about the relative worth of shrubberies but to shock people into a new way of perceiving greatness.

The humor and the absurdity are part of the main point. Jesus could have likened God's reign to the cedars of Lebanon if he wanted to describe an in-breaking state of affairs that would cause people to drop everything and be impressed. Instead he describes something more ordinary, and yet also something more able to show up, to take over inch by inch, and eventually to transform a whole landscape. Fussy people might deem this uninvited plant to be too much of a good thing. Others might consider it a nuisance, but what about those who, like the birds, need a home where they can be safe? They will be happy.

The parable therefore depends on satire. Just as it reorients the image of birds and majestic trees in Ezekiel 17:23, so too it promises to upend a society's ways of enforcing stability and relegating everyone to their "proper" places. The reign of God will mess with established boundaries and conventional values. Like a fast-replicating plant, it will get into everything. It will bring life and color to desolate places. It will crowd out other concerns. It will resist our manipulations. Its humble appearance will expose and mock pride and pretentiousness like a good burlesque show.

As a result, some people will want to burn it all down in a pointless attempt to restore their fields.

So therefore much of what makes Mark a theologically compelling narrative resides in the

confusion and mystery that propel the plot forward. Jesus generates amazement but also misunderstanding. Apparent insiders stumble along and abandon Jesus in the end, while some characters from the margins demonstrate an unlikely capacity for faith and recognition, like the anonymous woman in Mark 5:25-34; the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7:24-30; Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46-52; and the centurion in Mark 15:39.

These two parables therefore exercise an important function when Mark creates a crisis of confidence among its readers. The parables insist that the reign of God will not remain secretive forever, nor does its ultimate emergence depend on humanity's ingenuity, social engineering, pietistic intensity, moral virtue, or spiritual cleverness. It exposes and ultimately replaces systems of dominance and servitude, not only in sudden and decisive instances, but also in any moment in which it merely puts forth a new leaf or shoot. In those moments, people come to recognize God's reign, share in divine blessings, and join in God's commitment to forge an alternate society that renounces the politics of fear and intimidation.

It bears mentioning that Mark's outlook on the reign of God will not endorse a passive stance on our part. While there is something inevitable about God's deliverance, still other passages in Mark call would-be disciples to participate in the Christ's activity.

The parables found in Mark do not promise a gospel of unhindered *progress*, as if God's reign is guaranteed to be more prevalent and influential ten years from now than it was ten years ago. But the parables do insist that the new order Jesus declares through his words and deeds will not be relegated to certain spheres. There is no special biome to which the mustard plant is confined. With its seeds carried by the wind and stuck to hikers' shoelaces, it will grow where it will.

Likewise, the reign of God does not carve out a separate sacred space; it claims all aspects of human existence. There is no such thing, not in Christianity at least, as an apolitical gospel. There is no economically neutral gospel. There is no gospel that dismisses the importance of embodied existence and interpersonal relationships. Whatever we preach and however our church conducts its ministry, if it does not provide sanctuary, hospitality, sustenance, and renewal to those who need it, like little birds in a field full of foxes, then it is not the gospel.

In short, there is no gospel in which Jesus remains buried in the ground like a dormant seed. We do not understand how seeds grow into whatever, but it is not for us to try to understand. We need to just leave the growing part to God.

But PLANTING the seed...now, that is something we can do. Something we should do.

Imagine. Just doing the planting only. Planting made easy, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.