

Sermon on Mark 4:26-34
Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 14, 2015
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

“Life Is a Parable”

Perhaps you have heard this line of poetry: *“Oh, my love’s like a red, red rose, that’s newly sprung in June. Oh, my love’s like the melody that’s sweetly played in tune”* No, it’s not William Shakespeare! It’s a traditional Scottish song collected by Robert Burns in 1794. It’s poetry, to be sure, but if it were written about God, it could be called a parable. It makes me think of this question:

With what can we compare the kingdom of God,, or what parable will we use for it? It never ceases to amaze me how so often “life is a parable” - for the lessons Jesus would teach us about life in God, if only our eyes were open to it! So, what is a parable? Simply put, a parable is a short story or illustration that teaches us a deeper, religious truth about God – or the presence of God among us. A parable can also be a statement or illustration that gives us an analogy about God. The parables of Jesus in the gospels are great examples of this. Just listen.

Today’s in Mark’s gospel, we read: *Jesus said, “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.” (Mk 4:26)*

This is a parable that most of us can relate to. Granted, only one person here in this congregation is a farmer (though some of you have experience living on a farm), and few of us are master gardeners. But most of us have experienced planting something, even if just a single seed in the ground (like a kindergartner planting a bean in the dirt and watching it grow). We are well aware of the miracle of growth, for which we cannot take credit. We put a seed in the ground, water it, let the sun shine on it daily, and in a week or so, we see a new plant growing. We do not know how this happens, but we observe the growth. Such is the kingdom of God! The truth is, we don’t understand how it happens, but through faith, we recognize that it is a miracle (and a mystery) of God! So we just praise God!

Jesus’ parables of the kingdom of God are many – different ways in which he sought to describe for us how God works, in ways we can understand, with images from daily life. One of the truths that Jesus conveyed through parables such as this is that God’s kingdom – God’s realm - is it hidden and secret....and

often we just don't see it growing right in front of us, until later, when we reflect back on it?

On the cover of today's service sheet is a photograph of children and elders planting seedlings in the Kab Npauj Healing Garden. To my mind, this picture is a parable without words. For years the south lawn outside our church building has been an empty space (where homes once stood), unused except for weekly mowing and one annual concert on the lawn. But over the winter, a group of Hmong immigrants approached us, and asked permission to plant a garden on this space, where Hmong elders could heal from their displacement from their home country in Laos by digging in the earth, and teach Hmong children how to grow a garden. We said yes, and a few weeks ago we blessed this Healing Garden, celebrated with our new partners, and the tilling began! A week ago Saturday children and elders worked together to plant seeds and many kinds of vegetables – and this photograph was taken, as well as others of their work. To me, this photograph shouted out “Jesus’ parable of the sower! Can’t you see it?” Now we wait and watch for the growth, as the rains come down, and the sun shines on the ground.

So, what does it mean, a parable like this? A good rule of thumb in discovering a parable's meaning is that it generally has one main point, often coming in the form of a surprise (like a seed growing up, while you sleep!). One point I see in our Healing Garden photograph is that in the past 40 years, while we have been sleeping, a vibrant community has sprung up among our Hmong neighbors in St. Paul. Now we wake up to see a garden growing in our south lawn, and new friends are being made, if we are open to it! Let's just see what kind of growth can come from this, not only from the seeds and plants, but with our neighbors who till the soil. So, just stay tuned, and see what God can do!

Once we hear a good parable from Jesus, you and I are invited to write some parables ourselves – images we have for learning something new about God! What are some images you have of miraculous growth, or being in the presence of God, alone or with others? Perhaps you don't see it until you think, or look back in life! The gospels are full of examples of God starting with something small, even imperceptible, and becoming something much greater for the good of all, of scarcity becoming God's abundance. Here are a few:

First, there was the wedding at Cana, in chapter two of John's gospel, when the wine ran out when the party was still going full force. Jesus then took jars of water meant for rituals of purification, and turned it all into wine for the wedding banquet – wine that was so good, that the guests thought their host had kept the best for last! Then there was the boy who came to hear Jesus speak, who packed along a picnic lunch of two loaves of bread and three fish. When the crowd of 5000 people became hungry, Jesus took those measly loaves and fishes and shared them until the whole crowd of people had enough to eat – with leftovers!

Today we also heard the mustard seed parable, when the seed that is the smallest of all seeds, too tiny for notice, grows into a shrub large enough to provide shade for the living creatures of the desert, and for birds to build their nests.

Put them all together, and see how God takes our scarcity and our loss, and takes whatever meager thing you and I have to offer to make use of it for the greater good – sometimes so much so that everyone eats, and everyone has enough!

So what if we were to create our own parables, our own examples from our own experience, of God's amazing grace, taking our scarcity and turning it into abundance, often when we are unawares! What does this kingdom of God, this experience of God's presence, God's realm among us, look like?

How about this: Two Sundays ago we celebrated the graduations of 6 high school seniors from this small congregation, and two college graduates – a high number for us! 19 years ago NONE of these students were even alive, invisible in the life of this church. But they were born and raised here, baptized and confirmed, and now they have graduated - on to college or other experiences out in the world. What a miracle! *So the kingdom of God is like a congregation celebrating the miraculous growth of its children in 8 graduates whom God planted and nurtured in faith here, who enrich all of our lives by their presence!*

Or, think of all the thousands of human beings around the world who are hungry, and the many starving children who die from hunger. What can a small congregation do about this – or any congregation, for that matter? Well, quite a bit really, by organizing people and resources! Last Wednesday 35 of our children, youth and adults went to Feed My Starving Children in Eagan. Along with 100 others, we packed 108 boxes of manna packs, including 23,328 meals in about an hour – enough for 64 kids to eat for a year! Did we solve the problem of world hunger? No, of course not. But in just one night, we put packed enough meals to end hunger for these 64 children temporarily, giving them a chance to survive. *So the kingdom of God is like a room filled with children, women and men putting together food to lessen the hunger of 64 children across the world – in Trinidad!*

On a smaller scale, there are so many examples of God working in peoples' lives to do wondrous things, often in natural, everyday ways. We just need to see them as God's work! Here's one: My daughter Lori runs hurdles on the track team, and she finds great joy in running that race well. *So, for her, the kingdom of God is like running hurdles in 3 steps, not 5 – “flying” over the hurdles in stride!*

See? You can write your own parables, to share your own experience of God in this world! And then give thanks! For like the psalmist said: *It is a good thing to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praise to your name, O Most High; to herald your love in the morning and your faithfulness at night!...For those who are planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God!.*

Thanks be to God! Amen.