

**Trust the Lord to Grow It — Rev. Denise Stone**

**Text: Mark 4:26-34**

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH BIG FLATS NY, 06-13-2021**

We are going to think about the Kingdom of God today. More specifically, our role and God's role in developing the Kingdom.

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Hear Jesus speaking in Mark, Chapter 4, verses 26-34.

<sup>26</sup> He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, <sup>27</sup> and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. <sup>28</sup> The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. <sup>29</sup> But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

<sup>30</sup> He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? <sup>31</sup> It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; <sup>32</sup> yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

<sup>33</sup> With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; <sup>34</sup> he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.<sup>i</sup>

### The Word of the Lord, **Thanks Be to God**

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Like I said, we are going to think about the Kingdom of God today.

That is what Jesus is speaking about in these verses.

Jesus is using parables to make connections for the people about larger truths regarding the Kingdom of God and how it comes to be.

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In thinking about the Kingdom and how it comes to be, I'm going to spoil the ending of the sermon and give it to you now – it's really not about you. It's about God.

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***It's really not about you, it's about God.***

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Now that you know who and what this passage is about, let's look at the Parables that Jesus teaches to see how we get there.

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In the first parable, Jesus says,

“The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, <sup>27</sup> and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. <sup>28</sup> The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. <sup>29</sup> But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

It is possible that farmers might take issue with the image portrayed here – that they basically plant the seeds and then take a long nap until harvest time.

Farmers and gardeners do tend the crops they plant, weeding and watering when necessary. When harvest time comes, they then go out and collect the fruit of their labors.

Underlying this parable, however, is the fact that the farmer, for all of their skill, do not make the plants grow. The plants grow separate from the efforts of the farmer.



Look at verse 28: <sup>28</sup> The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.

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The earth produces of itself.

The farmer works to help the plants to grow, but it is the relationship between the earth and the plant itself that

fosters the mysterious action of the plant growing through to harvest.

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Let's look at the 2<sup>nd</sup> parable.

“With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? <sup>31</sup> It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; <sup>32</sup> yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

Again, Jesus is using a parable, an analogy of sorts, to connect his listeners (and us) to truths about the Kingdom of God.

Here Jesus uses the image of a mustard seed.



A mustard seed is small, as you can see.

It is also very plentiful where it grows.



Jesus notes about this shrub plant:

“...when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

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Jesus does not tell us HOW the mustard seed grows up – just that it does.

It is the same mysterious action of the first parable.

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Yes, we may understand the biology behind plants germinating and photosynthesis. However, that knowledge doesn't allow **US** to actively grow plants.

It is the relationship between the earth and the plant itself that fosters the mysterious action of crops growing through to harvest and shrubs growing to full size to be useful for the birds to rest in its shade.

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Remember, these parables are to give us insight into larger truths about the Kingdom of God and how it comes to be (not a biology lesson).

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So, what is it that Jesus is telling us with these parables?

I told you at the beginning of the sermon that the point is God and not us.

We are like the farmer or the gardener. We may plant the seed (information about the grace and mercy of God through Jesus Christ), but it is God that brings the growth in individuals, in our faith communities – this is the growing of the Kingdom of God.

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It's really not about **US**, it's about **God**.

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This might make us ask, is God really in control, like these parables suggest? The world certainly doesn't seem to give much evidence for that. Or does it?

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It may depend on how you are looking. Are you looking for the mighty works of God? Or are you too busy with day-to-day life?

We are all guilty of that. We must stop and remind ourselves to look for God.

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Or we might get focused on the idea that the Kingdom of God is all about the future: the potential for judgment and the gift of eternal life. So much focused on this idea, that we dismiss the idea of the Kingdom of God in our day-to-day life.

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Don Saliers, in his commentary on this passage has this to say about the mystery of the Kingdom of God,

... the mystery of the kingdom is that it is here and not here. It is already being shown in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, while yet hidden....

These are hope-filled parables. God will not fail to fulfill the promise of salvation. It is already coming to be in this world – like the seed sown in the earth, or the remarkable growth of the tree from the mustard seed, silently but powerfully coming to be.<sup>ii</sup>

As Christians, we are the recipients of this hope. We are the recipients of God's grace and mercy.

“God will not fail to fulfill the promise of Salvation.”

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Mark does not end this passage with just the parables, but he adds a commentary of his own.

<sup>33</sup> With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; <sup>34</sup> he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

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Why did he only speak in parables? Why did he only explain the parables to the disciples in private?

We can only speculate as to the answers, but we have a tendency to speculate, so I will too. 😊

Speaking in parables is necessary because the idea of the Kingdom of God is too big to define. Jesus uses analogies to point us to the truth of the Kingdom, but it will always be more than we can comprehend.

It is both present now and still not yet. Beyond our comprehension.

Jesus *tried* to explain the parables to the disciples – but even they did not “get it.” They only really get it in retrospect – through the lens of the resurrection.

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The questions of the Kingdom of God are never fully answered.

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Wendy Farley in her commentary on this section suggests,

Perhaps in working with these passages we should avoid explaining them. Perhaps we should simply let them vibrate in their strangeness so that our habituated patterns of understanding and feeling begin to loosen enough to allow something of



Jesus' strange and wonderful news to break into us.<sup>iii</sup>

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Ultimately, the Kingdom of God and how it comes to be is not about us, it is all about God.



We need to simply trust the Lord to grow it.

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<sup>i</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>ii</sup> Don E. Saliers. *Feasting on the Word. Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary.*, by David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 3, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, p. 142.

<sup>iii</sup> Wendy Farley. *Feasting on the Word. Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary.*, by David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 3, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, p. 144.