

Seed Power

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, June 13, 2021, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Mark 4:26-34](#)

Copyright © 2021 by Jeffrey S. Spencer

“Jesus did not speak to the crowds except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.”¹ Which was great for the disciples, but I sure wish they told us what they learned.

If you were here last week, you may remember that in chapter three of Mark’s gospel, Jesus redefined family. Then, in the beginning of chapter 4, Jesus tells a story about a prodigal seed sower who scatters seed with total disregard for where the seed is landing. The seed lands in several different types of soil – on a path where birds can easily eat it, among the rocks where it withers, among the thorns where it’s choked off, and into deep, rich soil where the seed takes root and yields a bumper crop.

Though Mark calls it a parable, this is really an allegory. After telling the story, Jesus pulls the disciples aside to explain it to them. The parable and the explanation are, I think, vital to understanding Mark’s gospel. (It’s strange that the lectionary skips Mark’s telling of this parable.) The explanation Mark tells us Jesus gave suggests that the different types of soils represent different types of people who hear “the word” – that is, Jesus’ message – and how they react to it. Mark is setting up the big question of his gospel: what kind of soil will you be?

Then, Mark says, Jesus tells two more parables, the parables in today’s reading. These are truly parables, for their meaning is far from clear. There’s no allegory here. These are mysteries, riddles. So, let’s spend more time experiencing these parables than trying to understand them.

In the first of these parables, we encounter a farmer with a pretty short “to do” list. 1: plant seeds. 2: go to sleep. That’s all he does; plant the seeds and go to sleep. And sure enough, the seeds germinate, the plants grow, and eventually there is grain to harvest. Now, I’m no horticulturalist, but even I know that growing a crop takes a lot more than planting and sleeping. Still, this parable resonates with my heart.

Wednesday afternoon, during Zoom with the Kids, we talked about what fills us with awe. I shared that certain experiences have filled me with awe. Sitting on a porch in the woods of northern Idaho, looking West across the lake at the sunset, I felt awe. I experienced awe sitting on the balcony of my childhood home as a thunderstorm rolled through, dropping heavy rain, lighting up the sky, and shaking the trees with the claps of thunder. Standing atop Steptoe Butte in Eastern Washington, looking across the undulating Palouse country in early August, just a couple weeks before the wheat harvest, as the stocks danced in the light breeze, I experienced awe as the lyric about amber waves of grain from “America the Beautiful” moved from my head to my heart.

¹ Mark 4:34, *New Revised Standard Version*, adapted.

And it is not only external experiences that move me to a state of awe. When I stop and think about how a small cluster of identical cells, given the right environment and nutrients, can grow and become a living animal (including living human beings), I am filled with awe. The mere fact that these identical cells will become different parts of this living animal, different organs of the body, and that skin ends up on the outside, fills me with awe. That a seed can land on the ground, and when it germinates, the shoot that will become roots knows to dig down and out while the shoot that will become a stem knows to reach up through the soil – this fact fills me with awe.

“If the kingdom of God is like a seed,” writes Jeanne Choy Tate, “it is also like the soil that embraces and blankets the seed, protecting it from the elements through fallow times until its time for fruition has come.

“I see myself in that soil, too. I am the land lying in wait, longing for renewal. I am the empty hollow cupped out of earth, a receptacle for the seed. I am the soil transforming dying vegetation into nutrients that will feed new growth. Jan Richardson describes the soil as ‘the space that waits for the seed, that holds itself in a shimmering emptiness, already loving what it cannot see but aches to enfold.’”²

The seed. The soil. What about the farmer? “The farmer in the parable can trust the seed to grow according to the promise sealed in it,” writes Justo González. In fact, “He *must* trust the seed to grow, for there is little he can do to make it grow, and nothing he can do to turn it into any future other than what is already promised in it. In due time, the seed will grow. Because the future is in the seed and not in the farmer’s doings, he can ‘sleep and rise day and night,’ trusting in the promise of the seed. Were he responsible for the seed’s growth, he would lose sleep over it, constantly wondering what more he could do to make sure that the seed becomes what it is supposed to be.”³

“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.... But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

I’m not sure why Mark put this rich, poetic, awe-inspiring parable between the parable of prodigal sower and the parable of the mustard seed. Maybe because they are all about seeds. It seems a strange literary choice to me, perhaps because I think the parable of the mustard seed seems like something a stand-up comic would tell.

With what shall we compare the Empire of God? Here. I’ve got one for you. Take a mustard seed. It’s the smallest seed (I know it’s not, but as Johnny Carson said, if you buy the premise, you buy the bit). The mustard seed is the smallest seed, and when you plant it, it grows into a mighty ... shrub. And its branches are so big, they cast a shadow.

If Jesus wanted to talk about big trees, he had the mighty cedars of Lebanon to talk about. And if he wanted to talk about the amazing things that can grow from small seed, he

² Jeanne Choy Tate, “June 17, Ordinary 11B,” *Christian Century*, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/june-17-ordinary-11b-mark-426-34> (posted 15 May 2018; accessed 8 June 2021).

³ Justo L. González, “Ordinary 11B,” *Christian Century*, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2015-05/june-14-11th-sunday-ordinary-time> (posted 2 June 2015; accessed 8 June 2021).

had the mighty cedars of Lebanon to talk about – their seeds are about the size of the tip of a ballpoint pen. There’s something else going on here.

Maybe the joke of this parable works better in first century Roman occupied Israel than it does in twenty-first century America. When Jesus told it, there may have been people scratching their heads. Maybe there were some people feeling offended, believing God’s Empire must be mightier than Rome’s Empire, so don’t tell me God’s Empire is a mustard shrub. But those who had ears to hear, I bet they were laughing. As Frederick Buechner asks, “Is it possible, I wonder, to say that it is only when you hear the gospel as a wild and marvelous joke that you really hear it at all? Heard as anything else, the gospel is the church’s thing, the pastor’s thing, the lecturer’s thing. Heard as a joke – high and unbidden and ringing with laughter – it can only be God’s thing.”⁴

“Heard as a joke it can only be God’s thing. And the joke is everywhere,” Nadia Bolz-Weber points out, “sort of like mustard in Palestine (mustard, by the way, is a weed). These parables of Jesus are like God’s joke in the form of an invasive species. God’s redemptive work in the world is a wonderful joke on all of us. It’s like kudzu. God’s word has to be that way because the good news of this kingdom started with the destabilizing humor of a God who comes in the form of a servant. It began with the nobility and majesty of a homeless unwed mother, the joke of the royal greatness of a peasant from an insignificant town. It continued with the honor of God dining with whores and traitors. And the joke continues as a stately procession of a beaten criminal walking toward his execution and the gallantry of a God who dies a pathetic death.

“And then there is the resurrection: the punch line to the greatest joke in human history. In the end God has defeated death itself while we are still offended by the joke.”⁵

The kin-dom of God – I don’t know how it works. I don’t understand how it grows. And maybe I sleep through the best parts of it.

If I have any insight at all today, it might be in this thought: The seed-scatterer seems to think that work consists of scattering seeds and harvesting crops. And, if we could interview a seed, it would probably tell us that it thinks the work is the germinating. And the plant would probably tell us that it thinks the work is in the ripening of the grain. And the baker would tell us that the work is in the grinding and loaf-making. And I will tell you that the work of God’s Empire is all these things, and probably in some I missed along the way. For if one part of the process isn’t there, people go hungry.

Amen.

⁴ Quoted by Nadia Bolz-Weber, “Ordinary #11B,” *Christian Century*, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2012-05/sunday-june-17-2012> (posted 5 June 2012; accessed 8 June 2021).

⁵ *Ibid.*