

“...he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.” Now, I’m sure I don’t have to tell you that there’s an essential difference between a parable and any kind of factual account. When Jesus says that the kingdom of God is like a shrub, even children know that he is not saying that God’s world is really and truly...just a bush. But there’s also a crucial difference between a parable and a fable, a subtle difference sometimes, but worth noticing.

A fable teaches through the use of is a clever story that offers insights into life and practical instructions for navigating life. In the Persian story collection, *The One Thousand and One Nights*, for example, Shahrazad tells a series of fables focused on her point that if people steep themselves in brutality and killing, they will eventually stop being human beings. And we can sum up most fables with a quick line or two like that: The boy who cried wolf? Don’t play with people’s trust. The tortoise and the hare? Slow and steady wins the race.

Parables also carry insights and truth, but they carry far more meaning than we can capture in a sentence or two. Instead of offering a logical conclusion to a sensible story, parables come to us through side doors or even through windows to disrupt our habitual way of thinking. Parables are stories laid alongside our lives. They interrupt what we think we know to expose us to new ways to engage the world around us. They deliver larger truths gradually and gently so that we can absorb it at a rate we can handle. Emily Dickinson said it this way:

“Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth’s superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind

The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind.”

The Cistercian abbot and author, Fr. Thomas Keating, once told me that God loves us so deeply that God only appears to us shining through the cracks of life because to see the Holy One directly would blow the meat off our bones. In the same way, Jesus uses parables to describe the coming kingdom of God, knowing that we really can't take it in all at once. Instead, we must steep in it and let the parable do its work of interrupting our thought patterns until our awareness begins to expand to make us more receptive.

What takes root within each human heart can be slightly different: for one, the parable of the seed growing in the field might speak to the wonder of faith or the need to be ready to bring in God's harvest. In another heart, Jesus may be saying that once we scatter the Gospel seed, we relinquish all control of the outcome and do not get to dictate who comes to faith and in what manner. That is to say that God is present within us and our world, growing like a planted seed as we sleep and rise, night and day; as we go about our daily lives. The kingdom of God cannot be earned, but can only be received as a gift. We can invite God's holy, merciful and peaceful presence to shape our lives, our imaginations and our yearnings so that God's love may become increasingly noticeable and evident. In that way, faith is more like falling in love than making a decision—more like love that captivates us whether we want to fall in love or not.

If that's what Jesus is implying in this first parable, then notice what happens when we think about people in our lives who have chosen to stop going to church. Like former parishioners who have decided to play golf or watch football or just catch up on their sleep on Sunday mornings. What about those of our sons and daughters who were raised in the faith but who stopped going to church when they were old enough to choose? When I was in high school, I went to a youth group whose leaders referred to kids who stopped coming as

“backsliders” and those who only came occasionally they called “lukewarm Christians.” I never understood how that was supposed to express God’s love.

Because if receiving the kingdom of God is like falling in love, if all our teaching is simply planting the seed, then aren’t all those people more than simply objects for us to target, persuade and cajole or shame into faith? No, instead, they are complex mysteries to be loved as part of the fertile soil that God is working while we go about our lives, sleeping and rising day and night. Our experiences of God’s kingdom can only be shared with delight, without strings attached—with the enthusiasm and generosity of a child sharing a dandelion ripe for blowing.

Let’s talk about the second parable. For some, Jesus may be talking about how God can grow small potentials into majestic outcomes. While that is true of God, this seems more like a fable to me. It helps to know that first century Mediterranean people would have considered a mustard plant to be an invasive weed that farmers would have wanted out of their fields at costs because it gets out of hand so quickly.

And so the slant truth of the parable may be more available if you hear it as though Jesus had said: “With what can we compare the kingdom of heaven? It is like blackberry brambles...” because Jesus seems to be implying that God’s kingdom, like the hardy invader of gardens and abandoned lots all over the Northwest, penetrates and thrives, growing wild whether we want it where it grows or not.

And then there are the birds that make their homes in this unruly and greatest of all shrubs. Given that the parable of the sower comes just before the two we heard this morning, is it possible that these are the same undesirable birds who snatch away the seed that the farmer sows? My mother used to throw table scraps out onto the beach behind their house on the Case Inlet in South Puget Sound. She liked feeding the gulls, but just hated the crows that came along. I asked her once why she continued to set out exactly what attracts crows and then disapproved of them showing up. She did not find my question helpful.

So it is with God's kingdom. Sometimes the very people we are hoping to avoid are among the birds who find shelter in God's loving embrace whether we approve or not. And sometimes, whether we know it or not, we are the birds who annoy other folks who would prefer that we keep to our own side of the street. And yet, consistently in Mark's Gospel, you and I and other odd people are the very birds drawn to build nests in the kingdom that Jesus proclaims. No wonder some folks prefer golf!

This "already and not yet" community attracts of all kinds of people living into a new reality that invades, overturns, and eventually overcomes the old one. A creation made new by the Risen Christ. A new reality that creates hope and expectation, leads people to change their jobs to share it, and to leave behind their old ways to live into it. God's kingdom is wild and out of human control. We don't know where it will take us or what we will do when it takes root within us. God's kingdom goes beyond the one or two sentence explanations of fables.

"...he did not speak to them except in parables," the author of Mark's Gospel tells us, "but he explained everything in private to his disciples." Now to be clear, Jesus *did not* explain with logical, rational, linear clarifications—not even in private to his disciples. Jesus did not hide the one or two sentence explanations from us and give them only to his inner circle. Instead, Jesus *was himself* the ultimate parable. He lived his life among his friends and family as the very model of receptivity to God. Jesus embodied the willingness to surrender control to a higher, more comprehensive truth, to receive what we do not create, to be as fallow as open field. His life *is* his explanation. The life, death and resurrection of Christ tells us all of the truth and tells it slant.

Our part is to come to this altar with our hands open, ready to receive God's gift, rather than with our hands closed around what we fantasize is ours to control. The gift is given in a small piece of bread and a sip of wine – as small and seemingly insignificant as a mustard seed or a blackberry seed sown in the ground.

Of course, the question that is always, *always* implied in the invitation announcement, “the gifts of God for the people of God,” is this: will we allow this little thing, this taste, this sip, this uncontrollable presence, to become the greatest of all things in that soil we call our life?