

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller

June 24, 2018

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 4:26-34

The Kingdom of God is Like....

The parables of Jesus have been said to be “narrative time bombs.” (Eugene Peterson) Little ditties that are meant to undermine our assumptions of things we accept unquestioningly. A turn of phrase that offers us a vision of something different.

Parable comes from two Greek words, *para*, “beside,” and *ballein*, “to throw.” A parable is throwing one thing (a vision of God’s kingdom) beside another (the world as it is) to see what happens.

The comparisons are unpredictable –
sometimes stark,
sometimes subtle,
sometimes obvious,
sometimes something to mull over.

But because they call into question accepted “truths,” they are almost always a bit subversive, challenging us to consider other possibilities in light of God’s promises.

The Kingdom of God is like...

Basileia tou Theou in Greek

The challenge is that “kingdom” seems so static, as if describing some fixed place, whereas *basileia* is far more dynamic, describing the arenas of God’s activity and influence.

Some translate it “the reign” or “rule” of God to highlight this more active dimension of the word. Which makes sense today since these parables describe something more qualitative than locational.

When we see the world as God does, and when we act toward each other as God would have us, we are living in God’s rule. That means that we can experience and participate in the kingdom of God here and now, as well as recognize that even our best efforts fall short of God’s vision.

Just as seeds grow without our effort, so also will God bring about His reign.

It is not up to us. We can’t make it happen. And we can’t prevent it. God is ultimately responsible for bringing His rule to bear and His Kingdom to fruition.

In this sense, it is more like the mustard plant that, like an out of control weed, grows and spreads and can hardly be contained, even if you’re not sure you want it.

It’s a slightly unsettling promise...at least if you think about it. Kind of like the petition we so regularly pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.” Do we really want God’s rule and will to be enacted among us? Of course, yes, when we or a loved one is sick, hurting, or in need.

But what about when we’re content with things just as they are? Because sometimes - often, I think - God’s kingdom comes and disrupts things - and possibly things that we even hold dear. Because where God’s reign is flourishing, His love shines brightly, and becomes more important than anything else.

When God’s love reigns in our church, we will care for others such that people wonder “why would you do that?”

I believe His love looks like giving away more than we keep.

I believe that His love looks like caring for orphans and widows and foreigners.

The Kingdom of God is like...

19 kids giving the first week of their summer to serve in Christ's name

And even more than that are the 3 adults giving up a week of vacation and family time to go as well

The Kingdom of God is like....

[Here I invited people in the room to share when they have seen the Kingdom of God in their lives. Four people shared....]

The Kingdom of God is like.... the mustard seed. However, mustard seeds simply do not grow into great shrubs with large branches in which birds build nests. Normally, mustard is a low shrub, no more than 8 or 10 feet high at best, very spindly and fragile, certainly not able to support a nest of birds.

But here, in scripture, it acts as no other mustard seed has. This exaggerating on Jesus' part is his best attempt at putting into words that which cannot be described - the Kingdom of God.

And so this parable should shake us up a little, awakening us to the promise that God is on the move - in our life, in our community, in the world - in ways that don't make sense, and that go against the grain, and which surprise us with the impact of His love.

This means that when things are going well, we can take delight in being more aligned with God's will and ways.

It also means that when life is hard, when we meet resistance, or when we fail or fall far short of our hopes, that we can take comfort in the promise that God is still at work and has not given up on us or the world, and never will.

Amen.