**June 14, 2015 – 3rd Sunday after Pentecost**

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Today’s Gospel contains one of many parables in the Gospel of Mark. But here, not only does Jesus speak IN parables, but he also speaks ABOUT them and the Gospel said that he only spoke to the larger crowd in parables but explained them in private to his disciples.

So what do we know about parables? Well, they’re stories, with a fable-like quality, told by Jesus, sometimes to his disciples and sometimes to the crowds. Very often they have an agricultural theme – seeds being planted, things growing, things dying, things being harvested. We often think of them as demonstrating some point that Jesus is trying to make, and that’s true, but there can be more to parables than that.

As you know, when I look at the Gospel with an eye toward preaching, I like to look at the Greek to see what insights it might give. Sometimes a word can have an alternative translation that can shed some light. Or sometimes, just like in English, a Greek word can be a compound word, made up of two other words that form the new meaning, and sometimes looking at that construction can trigger some new ideas.

This is the case with the word parable. The Greek word is *parabolé*, and it’s made up of two shorter words – *para*, which means beside, and *ballo*, which means to throw or cast. So literally, parable means something that is thrown beside something else to be compared with it.

Bear in mind that this is only one way of looking at parables. They are also memory aids and ways of framing a complex concept in easy-to-understand stories. But right now I want to focus on this alternative of two ideas running parallel to one another in order to form a comparison.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus uses two farming parables to talk about the Kingdom of God. His choice of topics to use in comparison is important. Remember the political situation of Palestine during Jesus’ life. The Romans were the last in a long line of conquerors and had the region very much under their thumb. So the word kingdom evoked the Roman Empire and everything that had been taken from them, but by the Romans and by every other invader who swept through the region.

At the same time, Rome appointed the sons of Herod the Great as puppet rulers over the area, as they had the father, creating another layer of kingship for the Jews, only this time by people who might be considered traitors. So no matter how you look at it, kingdom was a loaded word.

So rather than talk directly about the Kingdom of God, he draws a couple of gentle comparisons to agriculture. In the first, he compares the Kingdom of God to scattered seed on the ground. The farmer goes about his business and the seed sprouts and grows, and when it’s ready, the farmer harvests it. He doesn’t know the mechanism by which it grows, only that it does and he reaps the benefits.

Similarly, when we spread the Gospel, the Holy Spirit causes it to take root in the hearts of those who hear it and causes it to grow and flourish there. We don’t know how this works exactly, but we know that it does – we see it time and time again. Then when the time is ripe, God’s reign is established on earth – not a reign of power and fear and domination, but a reign of peace and joy.

The second parable uses the mustard seed as a comparison with the Kingdom. Once again, it’s about as far away from their current experience of kingdoms as you can get – a tiny little seed, the epitome of insignificance. But this smallest of seeds, when planted, turns into a huge shrub and provides food and shelter for the birds and animals.

God’s kingdom, in this parable, starts out small and seemingly insignificant, but spreads out and flourishes. And rather than the oppression and deprivation of the kingdoms the Jews are familiar with, this kingdom provides safety and security for all of God’s people.

As you can see, these aren’t one to one comparisons. Rather, they serve to illuminate the lessons that Jesus is trying to teach us and maybe give us ideas of how we can participate in bringing about the Kingdom of God. Because that’s what this is all about – bringing about the Kingdom of God on earth. This is what we are here for, and the point of everything that Jesus has to teach us in the Gospels.

So how do these parables show us the way?

The first one with its farming theme, shows us how necessary it is to trust God and the Holy Spirit. The farmer sows the seeds, and expects them to grow. He doesn’t know how, and he doesn’t need to know. All he knows is that he has to put the seeds in the ground and then, at the right time, take in the harvest. God does the rest.

We live in an era of control. We need to manage everything around us to plan for any eventualities. But as all farmers know very well, some things, like weather, are simply beyond our power to control. It does what it wants, when it wants, and we can either work with it or around it. Similarly, we can’t control God, or how the Holy Spirit works in the world. All we can do is faithfully spread the Word and trust that God knows what he’s doing. But nothing will grow where no seeds are planted, so that’s our responsibility.

In the second parable, the huge shrub is all out of proportion to the tiny seed from which it grew. We can’t predict what even the smallest of actions on our part in following Jesus might grow into. Everything has the potential for greatness in the Kingdom of God, no matter how insignificant it might seem at the time. It might be spending five minutes in prayer or reading even a paragraph of the Bible every day. It might be a small act of service or kindness. The smallest seed, at least in our judgment, can be great with the power of God behind it.

So what these parables are saying to me this morning is that we should sow the seeds of the Gospel and sow them extravagantly. Let go of the idea of controlling how God makes those seeds grow – that’s not our job. And in our personal lives, take one small step each day towards the kingdom of God. Follow Jesus just a little closer, in small ways, every day, and let God work on that one tiny seed of faith to produce great things for his glory.

Amen.