

## June 13, 2021 Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

Let us pray,

Sovereign God, quiet all the voices within our heads, hearts and spirits. Open our ears that we may receive your truth above the din of the world. And open us anew to how you work through the smallest, least likely things, even us, to advance your kingdom on earth. Amen.

Our scripture reading for this morning comes from the gospel of Mark, chapter 4, verses 26 through 34. Listen now for the word of the Lord.

*26 He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, 27 and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. 28 The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. 29 But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come." 30 He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? 31 It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 32 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." 33 With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; 34 he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.*

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

In April of 2020, a news story went viral - that for the first time in decades, people in the northern Indian state, Punjab, could see the Himalayas off in the distance. You see, over the past 30 years, as air pollution got worse and worse, the beautiful Himalayas disappeared from their view.

Now, 30 years later, they were visible again from almost a hundred miles away.

April 2020 was in those early days of the pandemic. The world had just shut down, people were staying in their homes and were still afraid - no one was going anywhere.

Which means air pollution was getting better. People weren't driving or flying, or working in factories.

For the state of Punjab, it was getting so much better that this shut down and reduced air pollution allowed for the Himalayas to once again emerge into view.

A reminder of the beauty in the world when it felt like the world was collapsing. and it happened because Covid forced us, the world, to stop. The world had to rest.

In our scripture for this morning, Jesus tells two parables about the kingdom of God.

Jesus spoke a lot in parables - it seemed to be his preferred mode of communication - and it makes sense.

You see parables - they combine the familiar with the unfamiliar. The familiar - images of a farmer planting seeds - to bring into view the unfamiliar - the kingdom of God.

And Jesus uses these parables because they spark our imagination. As Nibs Stroupe writes: "In using parables Jesus is seeking a shift in our imaginations, a shift in the way we see ourselves, see God. And see others."

Parables, upon first glance, because of these familiar images, are deceptively easy to understand. But each time you go back to the text, you begin to pull back layer upon layer of meaning.

These are the only two parables in the Gospel of Mark that teach us about the kingdom of God.

The first parable, about the sower, is only found in Mark.

The second parable, the mustard seed - is found in other gospels but the seed grows into a great tree, not a shrub.

In both of these two parables, Jesus sparks our imagination through seeds that grow - and the mystery of how they grow. How they transform all on their own. And we're invited to see the mystery of the kingdom through the mystery of how seeds grow into a harvest, or a great shrub that offers life and protection.

But what's remarkable about these two parables, to me, is what little we, God's people, have to do. How little we are involved.

A person is actually only mentioned in the first parable - the person - or more specifically - scripture just says someone, scatters seed on the ground and the goes to sleep and the seed sprouts and grows. and wakes up and there it is.

We go to sleep and wake up, and there it is: the harvest, the kingdom of God.

In the next parable, no person is mentioned. but we can assume someone has to sow the mustard seed into the ground but that's it - it grows on its own.

A kingdom grown when we sleep - a kingdom grown where all we have to do is sow the seed. and then rest.

Perhaps it's a bit uncomfortable to face the reality of how little control or understanding we have of the Kingdom of God.

That anyone can scatter or sow the seed. But perhaps there is such grace in knowing that in God's kingdom, we just rest. Rest in the assurance and faith that, as Wendy Farley put it, "Intimacy with Christ grows in us as certainly and as effortlessly as seeds grow." That "we have so little to do with Christ's nearness to us that we can just go to sleep."

In our culture, in our American culture - work is everything. Our American dream is if you work hard, you can achieve anything. We value hard work, and lots of it, as our duty to be good productive members of society.

I, most certainly, play directly into this mentality. I worked extra jobs all through college and grad school.- in my most extreme in college, I had 3 jobs on top of being a full time student.

I took on more and more because I looked down on rest. I didn't like having too much time to just be. In ways, it made me uncomfortable.

I would imagine that many of you have a similar story too - working nonstop to achieve what you want. Working hard to be a good citizen. Rest didn't fit in to that.

Jesus flips the tables on how we define rest. On what we think of rest.

Parables, and the imagination they spark, teach us The kingdom of God is not within our human framework or culture.

As we peel back layer upon layer of meaning in these two parables, we are able to see that we cannot achieve God's kingdom through tireless hard work and determination.

Through these specific parables Jesus teaches that the Kingdom of God is of God. God's framework. The seeds of the kingdom grow of themselves. A kingdom where our own rest is crucial to the mystery of growth.

We work so hard to solve every problem. And sometimes this is good - it does produce good things and work does contribute in a positive way to our society.

But it is also pushed to an extreme. People burn out, mental health suffers, physical health suffers, stress becomes unmanageable.

We cannot use this mentality when it comes to God's kingdom. We cannot define God's kingdom in our framework, because God calls us into being in a different way.

God calls us to "recognize that spiritual growth and intimacy with God arises as naturally as seeds growing."

In God's kingdom, we need not solve every mystery, we need only sow the seeds. We need only be who we are. We need only rest.

Growing up, I used to go over to my grandmother's house and watch the TV Show 'Mr. Roger's Neighborhood.'

Mr Rogers, as you probably already know, was a beloved Presbyterian minister famous for his incredible work with children.

There's a quote from Mr. Rogers that has always stayed with me. And he would say this quote on the TV show to kids. He would say, "I like you just the way you are."

And what he was teaching those kids, and me, and you, is that you don't have to do anything to be worthy of love. You just are.

IN rest, in us being the sleeping gardener waking up just in time for the harvest - in us simply scattering the seed and then stepping back to see it grow into a great shrub - God is saying to us - I like you just the way you are - you are worthy of my kingdom because out of love I created you. We need only plant the seeds.

I can only imagine what it must have been like to wake up one morning and see the Himalayas for the first time in 30 years. Or perhaps to wake up one morning and see the Himalayas for the first time ever.

Knowing that they had always been there, but trapped behind clouds of our making. And to see it all because we were forced to rest.

What beautiful mysteries of the Kingdom of God will be revealed to us when we just rest. When we rest in assurance that while we cannot always understand the mysteries of GOD's kingdom and how it grows - God does not require us to understand. Only to have faith. and rest in that faith.

Thanks be to God. Amen.