

THY KINGDOM COME...

Mark 4:26-34

Preached by Dr. Cahill

Babcock Presbyterian Church

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Jesus is universally recognized by both believers and nonbelievers alike as the greatest teacher who ever lived primarily because His teachings were so profound yet so simple that a five year old child could understand them. His favorite teaching tool was the parable, an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Jesus would take something from nature or the human experience, like a seed growing secretly into a large tree or a woman losing and then finding a precious coin and through these parables Jesus' listeners received insights about God working out his purposes. These parables teach how to cooperate with God and realize when we don't, God circumvents us and move forward with or without us.

Today's scripture from Mark's Gospel is a case in point. Two parables with a common theme invite us to be surprised by God's activity all around us despite whether we realize it or not.

These two parables are all about the reality of the Kingdom of God secretly growing all around us. Now when Jesus spoke of God's Kingdom he wasn't speaking of a geographical location. He never implied God's Kingdom is anything like an earthly kingdom dominated by kings and queens, lords and knights. Instead the Greek work for kingdom in the four gospels is not so much a noun as it is a verb, an action word meaning the reign or the activity of God in the world.

Being a citizen in God's Kingdom means intentionally submitting to God's authority in order to be embraced by God's love empowering us to become who God wants us to be and do. No one is ever bullied or forced. Instead we are given choices. Your right of free will is never revoked because after all, God is love. As the Apostle Paul wrote, "...love is patient and kind and never insists on its own way."

Maybe another way to explain the Kingdom of God would be the will of God. Living in the Kingdom and under the will of God are one in the same. Why else would we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

So submitting to God is ultimately what Christianity is all about. You might even think of God's Kingdom as a parallel universe vis-a-vis the world system. Even so we need to be clear about something. We are called to be citizens of the Kingdom and not just members of a church. You see the Church is only the vehicle Christ left us to reach our ultimate destination, the Kingdom of God, which shouldn't be confused with the Kingdom of Heaven. Remember,

the boundaries of God's Kingdom includes the world we live in, not just the world we long for and as long as we live in this world our membership in the Church, the Body of Christ on earth, we are given the responsibility of extending the boundaries of God's Kingdom by living out and sharing with others through both word and deed the Gospel Christ gave us.

Knowing this prepares us to hear again these two parables about God growing the Kingdom.

Because his listeners lived in an agrarian society Jesus said, "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 sprouts and grows, he does not know how. (Mark 4:26-27) But when the grain is ripe at once he goes out with his sickle because the harvest has come. (Mark 4:29)

You may remember me telling you the story about me telling my mother when I was in elementary school, that I wanted to plant a pumpkin patch. For some reason I was fascinated by pumpkins. Anyway, after planting the seeds I sat there and waited for the seeds to sprout until my mother finally convinced me watching wouldn't make them grow any faster. So I forgot about them until one day in late July. Pumpkin vines were spreading all over the place. By September I fulfilled my dream, and opened a pumpkin stand in front of the house and sold quite a few.

Isn't this what happened in Jesus' parable? And since a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning the lesson in the parable is clear: growing the Kingdom is God's work. It grows with or without us and whether we see it happening or not.

Jesus then taught another parable of the Kingdom, concerning a mustard seed, the tiniest of seeds you can hardly see. This parable is about the Kingdom's obscure beginnings. Just as a great oak tree sprouts from a tiny acorn, the mustard seed grows into a large bush.

Keep in mind when Mark included this parable in his Gospel the Church was still small, consisting of tiny scattered congregations situated primarily in the south eastern territories of the Roman Empire. What's more, the Christians were still a minority living under the threat of persecution.

How hard it must have been for those first century Christians. There were feared and distrusted by their neighbors, never knowing if or when they would be arrested or put to death for their faith. And yet against all odds Christ's Church grew and God's Kingdom spread. How do you explain it? "The Kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seeds on the ground," "it is like a mustard seed...the smallest of seeds...and yet it becomes the greatest of all shrubs...so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

We need to hear this parable whenever it seems the Church is losing ground. As you well know in our time and place Christians aren't facing persecution, instead we're being ignored if not dismissed by a growing segment of the population. You've read the polls about

falling church membership, you heard reports and even experienced firsthand the lack of interest family members, friends, neighbors and coworkers have in organized religion. But that doesn't mean these same people are not interested in spiritual growth and the pursuit of justice and peace in the world. And they haven't given up on Jesus. Jesus and his gospel are still admired by many but because of the failures of the modern Church, the rapid secularization of the culture and multiple other reasons, too many people see a disconnect between Christ and church members.

Is it time to throw in the towel? Or, is it time to reconsider and reimagine the role Christ has given our generation to help expand the boundaries of his Kingdom by claiming and then sharing the experience each one of us has had with his gospel?

I'm so glad I asked Willie Lewis to preach last Sunday. Like Jenn Pearson who also preaches powerful messages Willie brought his own perspective to the pulpit. In simple but profound words Willie reminded us there is no set script to share the good news of Jesus Christ to friends and neighbors who hunger and thirst for righteousness. On the contrary, your script is the one already written on your hearts: your own life experiences impacted by the active presence of God. It's not slick presentations and carefully crafted theological arguments that draw people to God, it's your witness of the gospel story intervening with your story, humbly told, that grabs your listeners' attention until light bulbs go off and new insights are born. That's how the Kingdom sprouted and grew two thousand years ago. It wasn't just the Apostle Paul, Peter, James and John, it was everybody who risked everything as God grew them from tiny seeds into a great movement that couldn't be stopped.

Yes, God alone grew the Kingdom, but those first Christians answered the call to bring in the harvest. Remember how Jesus ended the first parable?

But when the grain is ripe, at once he (the farmer) goes in with his sickle because the harvest has come. (Mark 4:29)

For the past six weeks roughly half of our worshipping congregation has volunteered their time and effort to go through the New Beginnings process, not to solve the problems we face as a congregation but to consider the possibilities God is showing us so we can do more to expand the boundaries of God's Kingdom in our neighborhood. They've learned there are no quick and easy fixes.

Our aim is not to double our membership in five years so we can fill the pews and balance the books like we did in the good old days. All God wants from you and me is to be faithful, listen for God's still small voice, pray for guidance and then dare to take risks to accomplish the impossible.

If it happened before two thousand years ago, by the grace of God it will happen again. True, unlike the first generations of Christians we're not facing fire, dungeon and sword but like them we are facing fear of the unknown and the temptation to do nothing.

New Beginnings is not about saving Babcock Church. It is about saving souls by bringing Christ to our neighbors as the Spirit leads us.

Jesus is calling you and me to do something risky yet necessary to enhance our ministry to the lost, confused people, people just like you and me in our neighborhood. At the same time God promises to be faithful and help us turn things around maybe not the way we expect, but the best way, that serves his Kingdom.

Jesus and countless others after him, following his example threw caution to the winds and took the harder road. Submitting to God's will they risked everything for the kingdom of God.

Now it's our turn. God bless us all. Amen.