

The Mystery of the Kingdom

Mark 4:26-34

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

June 13, 2021

For starters, let's talk about parables.

When we think of parables, we think of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan, right? Stories, entertaining, provocative, artfully constructed stories. Amy-Jill Levine, the New Testament scholar, wrote a book about parables. It's titled Short Stories by Jesus.

But in the text we have just read, what the text itself calls parables are not stories. What's going on?

Our word parable is a transliteration of the Greek word *parabole*, which simply means a comparison. It's a compound word. *Para*, meaning alongside, and *ballow*, to throw. *Parabole* means to put things side by side. To compare.

The teachings in our text are good examples. Jesus says, "*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 would sprout and grow, he does not know how.*" You put the kingdom of God here and then you put the image of a farmer planting seeds alongside it and compare the two.

The other teaching is even more clear. "*With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed . . .*" The Greek word that is translated "compare" is the same word that is translated "parable," though a slightly different form.

A parable is a comparison, not necessarily a story.

There is usually no explanation of the meaning of the parable. That would defeat its purpose, which was to generate conversation, to get people thinking. Explaining what a parable meant would be like telling a riddle and giving away the solution before people had time to think about it.

The point was to stimulate thought and conversation. So, people heard Jesus teach, and on the way home they argued about what he meant.

Everyone's not-so-favorite uncle, an orthodox contrarian who meant it when he said, "I beg to differ," said, "I don't think the kingdom is like a mustard seed at all. I think it's more like a date palm tree myself. You have to shinny up that long, limbless trunk – ripping up your knees – but the reward, those wonderful dates, are worth the pain. The kingdom is like that. Mustard seed – humph."

You know there must have been conversations like that.

Fortunately, the two parables in our text are fairly straightforward.

In the more familiar parable Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a mustard seed. If you are an inerrantist who believes that every word of scripture is true, botanically as well as theologically, you're going to have trouble with this parable. It says that the mustard seed is the world's smallest seed, which I have been assured it is not.

The KJV says birds nest in the shade of its "great branches."

When I was a young minister, I took a trip to the Holy Land, which was obligatory for young Baptist ministers in those days, and I did not see a mustard tree

with great branches; I saw a mustard bush or shrub as the NRSV says. It was maybe five feet tall.

Unless you are an inerrantist, that presents no problem. The point is still made: a tiny seed grows into a plant thousands of times its size, maybe large enough for birds to build a nest in, if they are really small birds.

Jesus said the kingdom of God is like that. In what way? That is what he wanted you to think about.

But I want to focus our attention on the other parable, the one about the farmer planting seeds.

In order to understand this parable, we have to set aside everything we know about farming. If we don't know anything about farming, we have to set aside everything we know about gardening. We have to imagine a pre-scientific farmer, who probably did not have specialized implements for planting. The most common method was to simply throw handfuls of seeds on the ground.

That is what the farmer in Jesus' parable does; he "*scatters seed on the ground.*" Then, there being nothing left for him to do, he waits. He goes about his business. Maybe every few days he goes to the field to see if there has been any progress. One day he sees sprouts beginning to break the surface of the soil. The seeds "*spout and grow . . . first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.*" Then "*he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.*"

Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is like that." In what way? That is for us to think about.

I said a moment ago that Jesus didn't usually give the meaning away. But sometimes he couldn't resist giving the listeners a hint. In this case, he said that the seed began "*to spout and grow – he did not know how.*"

To the farmer the growth of the seed into a mature plant was a magical, miraculous, mysterious wonder. He had no idea what was going on beneath the soil. He hadn't taken Farming 101 at the county extension center. "*He did not know how (it happened).*"

"*The earth produces of itself,*" Jesus said. From the perspective of the farmer, and probably Jesus, it was all of God, it was all of nature, a sentiment that the hymnist Natalie Sleeth captured in her hymn "Hymn of Praise."

*In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed, an apple tree;
in cocoons, a hidden promise: butterflies will soon be free!
In the cold and snow of winter there's a spring that waits to be,
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.*

This parable is about mystery – the mystery of the secret, life producing powers of nature which begin in the utter darkness beneath the soil and the mystery of the Kingdom of God which has its origin in the deepest recesses of the soul.

In his late-night conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus made a different comparison between nature and the kingdom of God. He said to Nicodemus, "*The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.*" (John 3)

Here the emphasis is not on the secret nature of the mysterious movement of God's Spirit; it is on the freedom of the Spirit.

As mystery, the Kingdom of God, secret and free, resists any effort to systematize its power, to reduce its energy to a formula that human beings can harness and weaponize, though God knows the church has tried.

When I was in graduate school at Baylor, Jerry was one of our neighbors. He was in the business school. He had a wife and two children, so he got a part-time job to make ends meet -- selling vacuum cleaners door to door. When he was starting his new job, he came to our house and asked if he could practice his sales pitch. Of course, we said he could. He set up in the living room and went into his routine.

"Mr. Groves," he said.

"Wait a minute, Jerry. What's with this 'Mr. Groves'? We're friends."

"I know," he said, "but I have this script that I have to follow."

He continued, asking me a series of questions he already knew the answers to, questions that were designed to get me to say, "Yes, I would like to buy a vacuum cleaner."

Finally, I stopped him and said, "Jerry, just tell me about the vacuum cleaner."

"I'm not allowed to do that," he said. "I have to follow the script." Which he did. We didn't buy the vacuum cleaner.

As the old storytellers used to say, I told you that to tell this. One night Irving Greenberg came to dinner. Irving and my wife were colleagues in a unit of the Texas Employment Commission that was housed on the Paul Quinn College campus.

Irving was a middle-aged, single guy who lived in the YMCA, back in the days when middle-aged single guys lived in the Y. He liked living there. There was one drawback, however.

"About once a week," he said, "these Christian churches send teams of people who stand at the entrance to the Y and try to save our souls. They arrange themselves so that you have a hard time getting around them and in the door."

If you haven't guessed, Irving was a Jew. So, he had no experience with soul-winning classes. But he figured it out. "I think they take these classes," he said, "where they're taught how to do it. They always start with a yes or no question. If you answer yes, that triggers a follow-up question, which is also a yes or no question. If you answer no, that triggers a different yes or no question. No matter what you do, you're trapped. What you have to do is give an answer that they had not anticipated."

"If they ask, 'Do you believe in God?' and you say yes, there's a follow-up question; if you say no, there's a different follow-up question. But if you answer, 'Sometimes,' they don't know what to do with that and that gives you time to run around them and get in the door."

That's when I realized that we were taught to sell Jesus the same way Jerry was taught to sell vacuum cleaners.

The Spirit cannot be systematized, organized, weaponized, harnessed, coerced, controlled, managed, manipulated, reduced to an ideology, squeezed into a formula or even predicted. Which the church discovered on Pentecost, but which the church tends to forget on a regular basis.

The kingdom of God is rooted in mystery. It finds expression in every facet of human experience from intimate human relations to complex social issues. But it has its origin in the depths of the human spirit, the place where hopes and fears are hidden,

where promises are made, and dreams are tucked away. The place where prayers are born. The kingdom is rooted in the holiest of all holy places, the place where the depth of God speaks to the depths of the human heart, assuring us that we are indeed the children of God. Amen.