

A Sermon for the Third Sunday after Pentecost 2015 Proper 6B

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In today's Gospel lesson, Mark tells us how Jesus began teaching in parables. As the summer goes on, we'll be reading Mark's gospel straight through, and you will get to hear plenty more of these stories – Mark reports that although Jesus gave explanations and interpretations to his disciples, to the general public he spoke only in parables.

So just what is a parable? A parable is a story, but a particular kind of story – a story that says one thing is like another, an extended simile. If you think of the word “comparable” which contains the word “parable,” it's easy to remember.

And Jesus uses the parables, these comparisons as a teaching tool because stories have a unique power to multiply meaning. Explanations close down meaning to a single interpretation, but stories are meaningful to the teller, and as they interact with the experiences and knowledge of the hearers, they call to mind other stories, generate connections and new wisdom, and, for people of faith, grow and spread the gospel.

Most of Jesus' parables compare various things to the reign of God, or the kingdom of God or the kingdom of Heaven. When I was in seminary, my professors were pretty adamant that we should prefer “the reign of God” as a

translation, because, especially to those of us who don't live under a monarchy, "kingdom" is generally associated with place, while Jesus is talking about something else – a time or condition when the world is ordered according to God's purpose. These parables of Jesus are not talking about heaven, they are teaching us about the community Jesus wants his followers to build.

Which, I think, makes much more sense of these parables. It's hard to discern how heaven is like a man with two sons, or a mustard seed, but our community is certainly supposed to be that way – welcoming back the prodigals while embracing and honoring the faithful; starting tiny and growing until we can shelter many. So when you hear these parables, try substituting "the community of the faithful" for "the kingdom of God" and see what meaning that stirs up. Recognize that our community is meant to be an icon of the reign of God, showing to the world what its transformation would look like.

Looking at the parables in that way, I think the first story Jesus tells in today's lesson is especially relevant to a community in transition like St. James' Church. Jesus says the reign of God is as if someone scattered weed on the ground, and then waited while it grew. The sower didn't know how it grew but saw it grow nonetheless.

That's kind of like what happened ten years ago when this community decided that an unexpected legacy was actually a call to buy this land, sell their historic home,

and call a new rector to help build a new place to be an icon of the reign of God. I'm sure some called it a leap of faith at the time, because that's how we tend to talk about such things, but wasn't it really planting a seed like the sower in the parable? Nobody knew exactly how or why it would grow. There were no building plans, no building funds – all of those things had to be grown too. But when they grew, just look what they grew into. And I don't mean the building, as fantastic as it is, or the grounds as beautiful as they are.

It is this community. You cast the seeds of who you were – what you had and what you knew and what you dreamed – and planted them, and by means just as mysterious and miraculous as the transformation of seeds into plants, you grew into the community you are today.

And, just as the new seeds from the harvest are continually replanted again and again, you are about to make a new leap of faith, plant new seeds, and be transformed again. Any day now, you will, through the tireless and faithful work of the Search Committee and Vestry, not to mention your own sharing of your stories and hopes and wisdom with one another, call your next Rector.

And just like the last time, you can't know what you will grow to be next, except by growing.

I grew up in a house with a beautiful, wondrous back yard. It was a little slice of woodland in a California suburb – the trees hid the neighbor’s houses from view, there was an artificial stream and lush ferns and a Cécile Brunner rosebush grown from a cutting from my great-grandmother’s garden, which she had grown from a cutting given to her by Luther Burbank himself.

Everyone in the family and many friends contributed to the garden, with ideas, effort, plants and seeds. But it was my father’s theory of gardening that made it what it was, and his theory was simple. Plant things. If they grow, enjoy them. If they don’t, plant other things. Do this for long enough, (a couple of decades for this one particular garden) and something extraordinary will result.

If we want to be an icon of the reign of God here at St. James’, like the sower in the parable we must keep planting, not knowing how things will grow. A new rector, new programs, new ways of engaging the neighborhood and the world, new ways of worshipping, and of being kind to and supportive of and attentive to one another and our neighbors. New forms of hospitality. We keep planting the seeds of who we will become.

And when we find that some of them don’t work, as many won’t, we plant different seeds, try different ideas. And, over time, some will grow. Some, like

mustard seeds, will surprise us with how they take off. And the ones that don't, well, we learn from those as well, and we grow despite all.

Perhaps most importantly, we need to think of our own stories and experiences as seeds that need to be sown. Telling one another and the world about our walk with God, our successes and our failures, our joys and sadness, will stir stories and insights and initiatives in others. And the Gospel will spread. And the reign of God will come very close indeed.

But the thing to remember in all of this change, whether scary or exciting, is that we don't need to be anxious about the outcome. Seeds grow into such beautiful and diverse and amazing and useful things because all of that beauty and diversity and amazingness is part of their nature. The acorn doesn't contain within it the pattern of which branches will get the most light and flourish, and which will be broken off by a storm or a passing hiker, but whichever way it responds to its environment, it will still grow into an oak tree, and it will still have the beauty that is part of its nature.

And so it is with us. We cannot say exactly how our communities will grow in response to the world we encounter, but like the seeds, we have in ourselves the pattern of beauty and diversity and amazingness. We are made in the image of God, and if we continue to plant and replant ourselves, the reign of God must grow

in our communities. You have seen it happen here, and you will see it happen again and again.

Amen.