

SERMON: Church of the Holy Spirit, Wayland, Mass. June 14, 2009

Sermon for June 14, 2008 - Church of the Holy Spirit, Wayland - Rev Judy Gay

SPROUTING SEEDS AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13; Psalm 20; 2 Corinthians 5:6-17; Mark 4:26-34

1. Big things and little things

Last Sunday's sermon focused on BIG THINGS, bigger than we can imagine or describe – God The Trinity, Creator, Risen Christ, Spirit, the “Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light in accessible hid from our eyes.”

Today's readings bring us right back down to earth again, to the littlest of things: In the first lesson we read how the prophet Samuel saw the promise of a great King in the smallest son in Jesse's big family of big boys, David, the child of whom we sing “Little David, play on your harp....” And in today's reading from the Gospel of Mark, when Jesus is beginning to explain about the Kingdom of God, he picks up a tiny seed and thinks “maybe I can use this for a parable to illustrate something about the Kingdom of God.” In Mark's Gospel (from which we will be reading for the rest of this year) we get two parables, or two versions of this familiar Mustard seed parable.

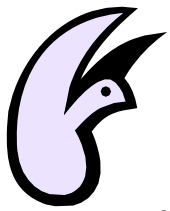
2. Parables and background

Jesus often told parables to get his listeners thinking deeply. That's the wonderful thing about his method of teaching. He didn't give easy answers or set rules and doctrines, but used images, pictures, stories, short memorable sayings and questions to get people thinking about the Good News of the Kingdom of God in light of the here-and-now circumstances of their lives.

And it is equally true today. We, like the disciples, are being challenged to think what sense these parables make to us. We need to ask: “what is God saying to me” and “to you” and “to us, as a church?” And we need to find ways to share and to listen, really listen, to each other as we all try hear what God is saying. So, turning to today's parables, let me first address a couple of questions people often ask:

1) First, “A Mustard seed isn't really the smallest seed is it?” No, of course not. Probably Jesus just meant that it was the smallest of the seeds commonly planted by farmers in that part of the Middle East. Remember that parables are not scientific statements, but thought-provokers.

2) “Surely Mustard plants are just little plants with small yellow flowers and spicy leaves, not great



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shrubs big enough for birds to live in?" Well, yes, but I've seen mustard plants, when left to go to seed unharvested in the fields become pretty tall and ramble. But maybe, some commentators say, this was a different, Mediterranean species, a weed called Black Mustard which actually does grow into a big shrub. Again, the important thing is the idea of rambling, expansive, almost uncontrollable growth from such a tiny seed.--the image, not the botany of it.

3) And birds? Well, yes, why not? Note that the parable says they come to nest on the ground in its shade, not in the branches of the plants. Does this suggest that the Kingdom of God offers an expansive welcome and shelter to strangers, to newcomers, to people in need of nourishment and protection? What do you think?

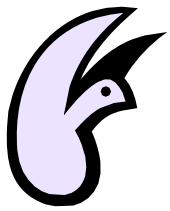
4) And why did Jesus compare something so GREAT as the Kingdom of God with something so SMALL as a tiny seed? First, we should remember that Jesus ALWAYS emphasized God's presence in the littlest and the least. We say "he had an option for the poor." He chose to reach out with healing and love to the marginalized, the children, the sick, the mentally ill, the poor, the despised and the rejected.

Some commentators think that Jesus was using this parable to make a deliberate contrast with a passage in Ezekiel 17 about the restoration of Israel after the exile. Ezekiel says that God himself will take a sprig from the top of one of the giant cedar trees, the cedars of Lebanon and plant it on the mountain heights of Israel so that it might produce boughs and bear fruit so that every kind of bird would nest under the shade of its branches." What a contrast! The kingdom Jesus was talking about wasn't one of power and might like the great cedars of Lebanon, to rival the might of the Babylonian Empire of Ezekiel's day, or the Roman Empire of Jesus' day. Think how the simple oppressed Jewish farmers and fishermen who gathered around Jesus would have understood this parable. It brought them hope for a different kind of Kingdom, not of power and might but of love and peace.

What does the Mustard seed mean to us. I don't know...but I challenge you, each of you as individual hearers of the Word, and the "you-all" all of us as Church of the Holy Spirit community this summer, to ask ourselves, What is God saying to us in these parables?

3. A Bible Study group in Cambridge

A small group of people from our parish in Cambridge meet every Tuesday morning for an hour to pray and read the lessons for the forthcoming Sunday, especially the gospel, and then share what each feels that God's Spirit is saying to him or to her. We are utterly different people who hear very different things. Let me just share a bit of what words spoke to each of us last week.



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Someone said: *"The earth produces of itself"* Maybe I work too hard, try too hard. I need to learn to pray and let God make things happen."

But someone else said: *"Yes, God makes the seed sprout and grow.* But you've got to do your part, to scatter the seed, to water and fertilize and keep the bugs off it."

Another said: Yes, *"And when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle."* We can't just leave things go. You have to be ready to go in with your sickle when it's time to harvest.

A church warden, worrying about some church projects, said: "But how can I change worry into discernment? Discernment about when it's time to harvest?"

One man, a mathematician, said: "When I have a problem, sometimes I need to pray about it and then let it lie fallow and sometimes in my sleep, almost unconsciously, a solution will come."

A woman said: "Maybe we should listen more to the kids in our church, the little kids, little seeds."

A young lawyer said: "I'm thinking about the big branches that grow. Actually the work I have begun doing for the church and an NGO, is like the large branches. Things I have started are really growing and I think I'm getting stronger and more able to help."

Looking at the end of the last verse a busy woman said "Jesus explained everything to his disciples. I think "I need to listen better."

And later a Chinese Christian friend looking at these parables said "I'm not a good evangelist but I can cook for the pot-luck suppers at our church. Maybe this little thing I can do will touch someone and draw them to God. Maybe the food I cook can be a mustard seed."

Each of these people was struggling with difficult personal issues. So in our Bible discussion on Tuesday each one was trying to listen for what God was saying to them, in response to their very different

challenges and opportunities. I have shared just a few of their comments.

- What issues are you struggling with?
- What new calls, new opportunities, are ahead of you?
- What is God saying to you in these two parables?

4. This church, hopes for development and growth:

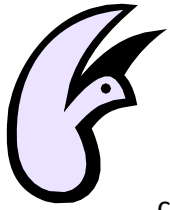
And what is God saying to us as a church community?

Of course Jesus was talking about the Kingdom of God, not the church.

The Kingdom of God is anywhere and everywhere that God's love, justice and goodness rule.

These are parables about the kingdom, not about the church.

But still, we hope that something of God's justice, love and goodness will be experienced here in our



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church, that we will have something of the Kingdom of God to share, and that we will see this church grow and spread its branches so that more people will find us and come in.

We just had a parish meeting two weeks ago focusing on the “Development Plan for Renewal and Growth.” The Tuesday Vestry meeting will continue the discussion.

So of course we are thinking of growth. And so how do these two parables speak to us as a church community? Perhaps that is something each of us should prayerfully consider this week. A few ideas to get you started:

Revival of the church and growth MUST begin with US, each one of us. In today’s epistle Paul says *“we try to persuade others, but we ourselves are well known to God.”* Are we? Are you? Am I? Are we in daily touch with God, so God can know us and we can be “well known to God.”

Paul says *“it is the love of God that urges us on.”* Is that what’s motivating us to grow the church? Is God at work in us, transforming our lives, helping the seed of faith to sprout and grow in us so that we will be ready when it’s time for harvest?”

Paul says *“From now on...we regard no one from a human point of view...everything has become new.”* Are we thinking of the growth of this church as the work of God’s Holy Spirit, or just as a commercial enterprise? Of course God wants us to use all the skills and gifts we can bring from our experiences in business, finance, public relations, administration, education, whatever. We must scatter the seed and water it and fertilize it. But let’s never forget that it is God who will cause the seed to sprout and grow, to put forth large branches and to help us welcome in all who will come to find shelter and hopefully to nest here.

Conclusion

As you go through this summer, wherever you go on holiday, don’t think you are going away from God. Even in Maine or on the Cape, take time to know and be known ever more deeply by God. Visit a new church wherever you go on holiday – and come back and tell us about it.

Stick with us in our summer worship if you stay in Wayland, and share your insights about what the Spirit is saying to us, God’s people, in the weekly Bible readings and in your daily prayers. Plant some little seeds to encourage your neighbors, the newcomers in the condos, the strangers in town to come to church with you. Give someone a ride.

Scatter the seed in faith and surely God will make it sprout and grow. Of such is the Kingdom of God. A
AMEN