

Jesus did not speak to them except in parables. Yes, this was the form of teaching and communication Jesus used. And, quite often, I think we misunderstand what parables are meant to do as we hear them. You see, we are people who like to solve problems. As we look at the parables of Jesus, we don't have to go far to find interpretations of these stories that seem to suggest parables are often presented as problems to be solved—and that once solved they can offer us “instructions for living.” However, as Pastor Nadia Bolz Weber suggests, “Parables are not neat little moralisms dressed in narrative. They are meant to be swallowed whole. Parables are living things meant to **mess with our assumptions and subvert things we never even thought to question.**” And, as I have mentioned to you before, theologian, Eugene Peterson says, “Jesus’ parables are like explosive, **narrative time bombs.** We hear them ticking away and we wonder about their meaning as they continue to go on ticking. We think maybe we finally have got it, yet it stubbornly continues to tick away and make us ponder. We walk away, but over the course of the next day or so it still continues to tick, tick, tick away. And then, all of a sudden, the truth Jesus meant to convey strikes home and kaboom! When this ticking bomb of a parable explodes we are

surprised and almost overwhelmed with its implications.” (David Lose, *In the Meantime* blog)

Well, in today’s gospel reading Jesus is again teaching, using the story-telling device of parable to convey meaning. Today, Jesus is describing the reality of the coming kingdom of God, the reign of God that is unexpectedly breaking in upon us, God’s presence in this present world. God’s dream for this world, is very counter to the reality we live as we go about our daily lives within the context of present culture. Jesus knows we cannot really understand what the kingdom is like all at once. Such understanding takes time. So, Jesus begins teaching about the coming reign of God by using parables that are **meant** to be explosive. His stories challenge the comfortable status quo and they challenge our thinking as they **turn** our thinking inside out and upside down.

Today’s first parable about this unusual farmer who rather indiscriminately seems to sow seed upon the ground, does not really make much sense from a rational point of view. This crazy farmer does not prepare the soil or tend it with fertilizer. He does not even water the seeds or pull out weeds. He just indiscriminately throws out the seed and waits to see what happens. The emphasis in this parable seems to be placed upon who or what causes the growth to occur after the seed hits the soil because

the farmer simply goes about his life of sleeping and rising night and day.

So, what is this really about? Well, it *might* possibly be about the wonder of faith **or** the need to be ready to bring in the harvest. Or, *just maybe*, it is about our complete inability to control or dictate the coming reign of God that unexpectedly breaks in upon us in various ways whether we or others believe or not. I have to say this possibility leaves us unsettled and uncomfortable because it leaves us in a place where **we are not in control**. It leaves us vulnerable and we don't like it. We don't like it when we see decline in the church. **We** want to build the church, build God's kingdom, and restore it to what we remember of days gone by. Yet, the truth is, God's kingdom **does come regardless** of our efforts. God's kingdom **cannot** be manipulated by **our** attempts to control because God's kingdom can only be **received**. It is **all gift**. In a very real sense, the kingdom or reign of God is something that comes from outside of ourselves and grabs hold of us whether we want it to or not. It is all gift and **not dependent** upon us or anything we do. It is **God** who builds the kingdom, it is **Christ** who builds the church.

This is a difficult lesson for those of us in the church who are doers and problem solvers. It is difficult for those of us who have such a hard time of letting go, for those of us with type A personalities who want to be in

control and in charge of what is happening. Yet, we are **not** responsible for making the church grow. **That** is God's work. We are **not** responsible for making sure everybody "gets saved." **That** is God's work and, quite frankly, God has already done that! We are **not** responsible for making God's kingdom a smashing success. No. Our job, our calling, is to simply plant the seeds and trust God to do the work of growing the kingdom.

We live in a world where people are so very afraid of losing control. We have been taught and continue to teach others that, in order to succeed, we must have a plan with well-defined outcomes and strategies for achieving those outcomes. We **so** desperately want to be able to measure our success. However, this is so very contrary to God's kingdom of grace. The work of grace, mercy, compassion, peace and justice is the work that truly matters in life and it follows a totally different outline than the plans and strategies we try to impose. All we are called to do is **live** God's grace, **live** the gospel, and **share** the good news of God's love for this broken, needy world.

The next parable Jesus tells is about the mustard seed. Jesus says, "The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 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." Now, if we really look at what Jesus is saying, we need to think about the mustard he is talking about. You see, the thing about mustard seeds is that while some varieties were used as spice and others medicinally, in general they were considered at the very least pesky and often somewhat dangerous. Why? Because wild mustard is incredibly hard to control, and once it takes root it can take over a whole planting area. That's why mustard would only occasionally be found in a garden in the ancient world; more likely you would find it taking over the side of an open hill or abandoned field.

So, knowing this, pick your favorite garden-variety weed -- crabgrass, dandelion, wild onion -- that's pretty much what Jesus is comparing the kingdom of God to. Oh, and that part about the birds seeking refuge. **Maybe** it's meant as a comforting image -- birds finding shelter from the elements. Or **maybe**, it suggests that once mustard shrubs take root, all kinds of things happen including the sudden presence of "undesirables." Looked at this way, Jesus' parable is a little darker, even ominous. As John Dominic Crossan puts it:

The point, in other words, is not just that the mustard plant starts as a proverbially small seed and grows into a shrub of three or four feet, or even higher, it is that it tends to take over where it is not wanted, that it tends to get out of control, and that it tends to attract birds within cultivated areas where they are not particularly desired. And that, said Jesus, was what the Kingdom was like: not like the mighty cedar

of Lebanon and not quite like a common weed, [more] like a pungent shrub with dangerous takeover properties. Something you would want in only small and carefully controlled doses -- if you could control it (The Historical Jesus, pp. 278-279).

Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is..... May these parables **mess with your assumptions and subvert things you never even thought to question.** May these parables stick in your mind like a ticking time bomb waiting to go off at an unexpected time and, when it finally explodes, may it overwhelm you with surprise and make you ever new.