

I do not know the origin of this phrase, but it has been said that “*Jesus told so many parables he became one.*” Jesus truly embodied everything he taught. And, those parables, the stories he told, are continually breaking open our understanding of the reign of God. In his use of parables, Jesus seeks a shift in our imaginations, a shift in the way we see ourselves, see God, and see others. I think far too often we misunderstand what Jesus’ parables are meant to do because we are people who like to solve problems. And, as we look at the parables of Jesus, we often find **interpretations** of these stories presented as problems to be solved – problems that once solved 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 Jesus’ stories, and they are **designed** to tick away in our minds as we **wonder** about their meaning. We may **think** we finally understand it, yet it stubbornly continues to tick away and make

us ask more questions. We walk away, but over the course of the next day or so it just continues to tick, tick, tick away. And then, suddenly, the truth Jesus meant to convey strikes home and kaboom, it explodes in our mind! The parable explodes, opening new pathways of understanding as we are surprised and almost overwhelmed with its implications.

Well, in today's gospel reading Jesus is again teaching, using the storytelling device of parable. Jesus is describing the reality of the kingdom of God, the reign of God, God's dream for this world, that is unexpectedly breaking into our lives and bursting in upon us. Friends, 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. And, Jesus knows we cannot really understand what the kingdom is like all at once. Such understanding takes time. So, Jesus begins teaching about the inbreaking 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 tells of this unusual, weird, bizarre farmer who indiscriminately sows seed upon the ground, throwing it out **anywhere**. This action does not really make 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 the 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 regularly 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, something that is happening throughout the country. We do not like it when we see only a handful of people attend our new Saturday in-person service, and so our anxieties mount. **We** want to build the church, build God's kingdom, and restore it to what we remember of days gone by, maybe some thirty years ago. And **now**, **we** want the church to be what it was before Covid-19. **We** want things to be like they were in February of 2020! Friends, the truth is, God's kingdom **will come and does come regardless** of **our** efforts and **our** mounting anxieties. 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, and 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 with 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.

Yes, 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, and we **so** desperately want to be able to measure our success. And, quite honestly, our understanding of success always seems to be measured in numbers. 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 **live** 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, or those obnoxious **thistles** that Ken and I are trying

to get rid of. That is pretty much what Jesus is comparing the kingdom of God to – obnoxious thistles! 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."

If we understand this, 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 proverbial 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).*

Friends, Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is like.....” May these parables **mess with your assumptions and subvert things you never even thought to question**. It is my prayer that these parables stick in our minds like ticking time bombs. And, when they surprisingly explode, I pray they continually work to change us and make us ever new, so that we too may embody the inbreaking reign of God in **our** everyday lives.