

Mark 4:26-34

“This box looks old. Parables are old. I wonder if there is a parable inside?”

The box is the color gold. Parables are valuable, maybe even more valuable than gold.

Look. The box has a lid. I know, boxes have lids, but so do parables. Sometimes, even if you are ready, you cannot enter the parable. The lid is like a door. Sometimes it is closed. If that happens, don't be discouraged. Come back to the parable again and again. One day it will open for you.

The box looks like a present. Parables are presents. They were given to you before you were born. Even if you do not know what a parable is, it has still been given to you.

I know what let's do. Let's look inside to see if there really is a parable there. I know they are easy to break, so let's be careful.”

Parables are wonderful, aren't they? The words I opened with are the way a Godly Play story teller introduces every parable. I sometimes wonder if every sermon about a parable shouldn't start the same way.

The word parable roughly translates as “riddle” or “puzzle.” They're an old rabbinic tradition. Jesus was the absolute master of the parable; in fact, even some Jewish scholars believe the old rabbinic tradition really started with Jesus' parables.

Parables teach us so much, so much more than their few words. Today we heard two, both just images really, not even stories.

In the first, the kingdom is like a seed, that grows by itself, no one knows how, no one needs make it happen. It just grows. That's it. It sounds so simple. But as it opens for us, we start to wonder.

Where is the seed planted? Is the kingdom growing in the world? Or in the Church? Or in me? Did God plant it in me? Did I plant it in my neighbor? Am I too busy trying to make it grow, instead of standing back and watching with wonder?

A mustard seed starts very small, and then grows very large. So does the kingdom. If we don't take the lid off the parable, that's what we learn. It's true, but honestly it's pretty boring. As soon as the lid comes off though, we realize that mustard doesn't really get that big. How can the birds of the air take shelter under it? A lark or song sparrow might nest under it, but seriously? The greatest of all shrubs it is not. Unless it is the kingdom of God.

And why mustard of all things?

When I was little, my best friend and I saw some mustard growing along my driveway. I called it mustard, as my mother had taught me. He called it a weed, as his mother had taught him. The fight we had over our mothers' honors is still the stuff of family legend.

Yes, mustard is a weed. It gets into everything, it spreads like mad, and it's hard to get rid of. It pops up in the

most annoying and inconvenient places and upsets our lovely orderly gardens. The kingdom of God is like that.

Mustard is also a cultivated plant. Its greens are good to eat, it is medicinal, it spices other foods, and in today's parable it even gives shelter. The kingdom of God is like that, providing sustenance, healing, meaning, and a nesting place.

Parables depend on context. Here in the northwest we might even take the liberty of saying the kingdom of God is like a blackberry seed. But then we would lose something that Jesus' listeners heard.

The image Jesus used of the birds of the air taking shelter would have conjured images from Hebrew scripture, like the one we heard from Ezekiel this morning. Here, in Ezekiel 17, God uses the image of a small sprig growing into a great cedar tree: "in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind." In Ezekiel 31, the same image is used for Egypt and Assyria, a giant cedar, that shelters the nations, all the birds of the air. Until it falls, and even then the prophet says, "On its fallen trunk settle all the birds of the air, and among its boughs lodge all the wild animals." The image is used over and over, in the Psalms, in Daniel. The great kingdoms are compared to huge cedar trees, under whose branches all the birds of the air make their shelter.

But the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. Not tall, not stately, not impressive in its strength, not proud. A weed, a garden plant, a shrub at best. And still, all the birds of the air find shelter in it. The kingdom of God is like that.

I wonder if we are too?

I wonder how we are growing in grace, as a church and as individuals, unseen and mysteriously?

I wonder how we are weeds, cropping up where least expected, good trouble tenaciously disturbing the established structures of society, proclaiming truth with boldness, and justice with compassion?

I wonder if we provide nourishment, food, shelter, savor, shelter, without the need for strength, or power, or recognition?

I wonder how we sow seeds?

I wonder if we are like the kingdom of God?

All of this from a couple little parables, the smallest of stories.

I wonder how Jesus' words will grow?