**Text**: **Mark 4:26-34**

**The Bethel Pulpit**

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He (Jesus) also said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.” He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It 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.” With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

May grace and peace be yours in abundance, in the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Sometimes when I pray The Lord’s Prayer, my mind begins to wander a bit. And when that happens, the words that I am saying lose their meaning and are replaced by whatever thoughts happen to be currently bouncing around in my mind. If I am fortunate, I catch myself and I bring myself back to the task at hand – praying; but more than just saying the words, I strain to re-focus on what those words mean – how they impact the person that I am and how they might help to shape me to be a better person in the future.

If all that happens in the short time that it takes me to get to the phrase, “…thy name thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” I am A) somewhat ashamed that my prayer life is at such a state that I cannot even stayed focused for through the first sentence but also B) (I am) overwhelmed by the magnitude of what those words truly mean – so much so, that it can feel as if I am brought to my knees.

“…thy kingdom come …”

Martin Luther’s take on these three words is what causes me to pause as I really focus on the words that I am saying. In his Small Catechism, specifically his explanation to the second petition of the Lord’s Prayer, Martin Luther reminds us that God’s kingdom comes on its own without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that God’s kingdom might come to us.

We pray that God’s kingdom might come to us.

That God’s kingdom – that God’s reign, that God’s presence, that God’s power – might come to us here and now. As we say, “thy kingdom come” we are praying, according to Luther, that God’s kingdom might come into our hearts again this day as we say these words in a new, fresh, more powerful and more affective way so that we might grow and become a better version of the people that we are now.

That idea can bring a person to his or her knees.

By asking that God’s kingdom might come to us, we are asking that our lives be rocked – that our lives be transformed from lives that are lived selfishly, fearfully, arrogantly, separately, narrow-mindedly. We are asking that our priorities and our values and our energies might be so completely re-focused, that our vision of the world and all those within it is seen from a new perspective; through the lens of love and hope and mercy.

Mark’s Gospel begins with Jesus being baptized by John – no little town of Bethlehem in Mark’s Gospel, no star or angels, no shepherds or wise men, no donkey or sheep. Instead, Mark’s Gospel begins with Jesus being baptized. And after that happens, Jesus begins his earthly ministry with this declaration, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

God’s kingdom – God’s reign – is first mentioned here in the first chapter of Mark and continues to be mentioned (nearly 20 more times) as we make our way through the gospel. The kingdom of God is an idea, a concept, a thing that is absolutely critical to Mark’s view of who Jesus is and what Jesus is about.

As we make our way through the Gospel of Mark and ultimately through the entire New Testament, we learn that the kingdom of God is not at all about geography or some specific place; instead, it is about the dynamic reality of God’s presence and God’s power within the creation and within the lives of God’s people – within us. In Jesus and in his ministry, God’s presence and God’s rule have taken on a new dimension and power among us and it is this new dimension and power that we are invited to come along and be a part of.

The two parables that are placed before us today reveal something about the kingdom of God and both do so with images of seeds and soil.

The first is the short and rather odd Parable of the Growing Seed. Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven is like when someone sows seeds and they land on dirt. That is about it. The farmer sleeps and the, almost mysteriously, begins to grow. The gospel says that “the earth produces of itself” this new growth. The word in Greek for “produces of itself” is the word automaté. This is where we get our word automatic.

When I think of the word automatic, I think of things that make my life easier, but I do not understand. They are things that somehow work (but do not ask me how) and I am eternally grateful that they do.

* They could be simple things like my coffee maker that makes my coffee at 6:30 am automatically.
* My DVR which is connected to my TV. It records the Packer football games for me automatically.
* my car’s transmission working automatically
* My cell phone doing updates and other things that I do not at all understand but are done for me automatically.

All of these things function automatically – and they are complete mysteries to me.

In the same way, this parable speaks to the automatic nature of the earth producing growth – and tied to that automatic nature is a holy mystery. The kingdom of God is often mysterious and hidden as it brings forth new life. But while mysterious and hidden, we learn here that growth will indeed take place. God’s reign – God’s kingdom – grows and, at least as we look at this parable, it grows at a pace that God and God alone determines.

But this parable leaves me scratching my head because there is so much that is not said. Who is God in this parable? What exactly is meant by the farmer doing nothing – does that mean that God does nothing or that human activity does not impact the growth of the Kingdom of God or does it mean something else? And where are we in this parable?

This short little parable brings with it many unanswered questions. It does not explain what the kingdom of God is in every detail, that is for sure. Instead, it places the kingdom of God in front of us and says it is kinda like this and sorta like that. And as we see it and recognize its power and its implications, we are left to maybe not understand it completely, but to respond to it confidently.

And then we move to the Parable of the Mustard Seed. It is important to know that the mustard plant – the mustard shrub – is seen by most farmers as a weed. And while it is true that it is an herb that can provide spices and be very useful for flavoring and preserving food, it is a terrible weed that can absolutely take over a garden. No one would sow mustard seed on purpose. It grows on its own so easily and it spreads like crazy. And they are very difficult to get rid of. With all that said, Jesus uses the mustard seed and the mustard shrub as illustrations of the Kingdom of God – this pesky weed-like shrub is what the kingdom of God is kinda like.

As I think about Jesus using the mustard seed as an image of the kingdom of God, I cannot help but think of my Dad – my Dad was a Lutheran pastor for 40 years and died five years ago. During the season of Easter I shared in the Bethelite an article that a pastor friend of my Dad wrote about him when my Dad retired. The article focused in on my Dad’s view that the Easter lily was a terrible flower for Easter.

To be fair, my Dad acknowledged that the Easter lily was beautiful – but he did not think they were a very appropriate symbol of Easter. They were beautiful, he would say, but they are so delicate; they require a great deal of care; the blossoms last for only a short time and the old blossoms are ugly and messy.

My Dad’s suggested alternative? The dandelion. The dandelion, according to my Dad, was a flower with some true character. He would say that the dandelion is readily available to everyone. You have to look a lot closer to see the beauty of a dandelion’s blossoms, but they are much more colorful and complex than lilies. Dandelions are not at all delicate; they are just about indestructible. No matter how hard you work to get rid of them, you know that they will be back. When a blossom is done, instead of collapsing into a slimy mess, it turns into dozens of tiny little parachutes, which are borne on the wind to carry the message of the dandelion far and wide. Dandelions are not only beautiful; they are tough, resilient, and irrepressible. Lilies are poisonous, but you can eat the dandelion’s leaves cooked or raw as a vegetable or salad. And the blossoms can be used to make wine.

My Dad’s closing argument for the dandelion was this: Lilies are spectacular and wonderful: but remember this: the Resurrection is not delicate or fleeting. Jesus’ Resurrection comes among us like a dandelion: it is bright and brash and cheerful. It is indestructible and irrepressible. It’s Good News spreads all by itself. There are those who have been trying to stamp out the message of the Resurrection for 2,000 years. They have always failed. They will continue to fail.

Like the dandelion, the mustard seed may at first seem to be an odd image to use as an illustration to compare to anything in a positive way, but as I think about the kingdom of God perhaps it is not so bad. While the farmers who may have been listening to Jesus laughed when he first said, the comparison between a mustard seed and kingdom of God may make some sense.

Maybe the kingdom of God is not much of a cash crop, but it does indeed grow and it is not easily eradicated. And the mustard seed, while not a beautiful shrub, is one that slowly takes over and completely transform the landscape that it inhabits. Consider how Jesus’ presence takes root in each of us – how it slowly grows and develops and in the process begins to transform the people that we are.

As we ponder what the kingdom of God looks like and how it plays out in our midst, this mustard seed comparison may be suggesting that the reign of God will mess with established boundaries and conventional values. It just might crowd out other – lesser – concerns. The kingdom of God will resist human attempts to control it or manipulate it. Its humble appearance will expose and mock pride and other pretensions.

Parables can challenge us with truths that we might find a bit uncomfortable. If our view of the kingdom of God, for example, is angels floating around on clouds playing harps, than we are going to be shocked by the words of Jesus about the kingdom of God in Mark’s Gospel. Or, if our vision of the Kingdom of God is wholly apart from our earthly lives – if it only exists in some far off heaven and will only happen at the end of time – so that we can live as we please in the here and now, than Jesus words here in Mark will also be a great frustration to us.

Jesus says that the Kingdom of God is now. It is already in you and me. And it is spreading like weeds. In his book, [*Stories with Intent*](http://www.amazon.com/Stories-Intent-Comprehensive-Guide-Parables/dp/0802842410), Klyne Snodgrass writes, “Like the tiny mustard seed which grows to a large plant, so the kingdom is present, even if hidden, unnoticed, or ignored … The kingdom, which has already begun with Jesus, does not come with a glorious band and the defeat of Rome; rather, it comes unexpectedly, almost unnoticed. But all that is necessary is already there, and the end is present in the beginning.”

The most challenging and perhaps the most disturbing thing about the kingdom of God is what it asks of each of us. If we do what Luther suggests that we are doing as we pray the Lord’s Prayer and ask that the kingdom of God come to us – to live in us and to truly impact who we are and how we make decisions – we are asking it (the Kingdom of God) to change us.

The Kingdom of God asks us to look at who we are now and it calls on us to be better. But not just a little better – as kingdom people our hearts burn for justice and mercy. As kingdom people our lives are shaped and guided by the needs of others. As kingdom people we do all that we can to elimination suffering and sadness. As kingdom people working for peace is at the top of our “to do” list. As kingdom people we build bridges and tear down walls wherever and whenever we can.

Kingdom people – that is what we seek to be when we pray, “thy kingdom come.” May God’s kingdom come to you and to me this day and like that pesky mustard seed, may it take root and grow in us abundantly. Amen.