

REFLECTIONS



THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Mark 4:26-34

Jesus 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.

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THE EXTRAVAGANT MINIMALISM OF GOD

By
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God is an extravagant minimalist. It seems evident that God likes to start small and watch God's creation grow and flourish. This extravagance of God's minimalism is revealed in some of Jesus' seed parables.

Nothing illustrates God's extravagant minimalism better than Jesus' parable of the mustard seed, the second of the two parables in today's lesson from Mark which is found in all three Synoptic Gospels. As most of us know, the mustard seed Jesus is talking about is considered the smallest plant seed. It was also a seed that produces a weed-like shrub that could grow to the size of large entangled tree-like bush which, as this parable depicts, serves as an excellent protective habitat for birds.

Although this parable talks about the mustard seed being sown, as one would sow wheat or barely, most farmers in the time of Jesus wouldn't dare plant it in a field because once it takes off, it is hard to control and spreads like a weed, overtaking the area where it exists. It is not only considered an invasive but also a pervasive plant. That pervasive invasiveness is the point of Jesus using the mustard seed as a metaphor for the Kingdom of God. Its wild, uncontrollable nature is particularly suited to describe the entangled spread of God's Realm.

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Found only in the Gospel of Mark, the Sowing Seed Parable is easily overlooked because it follows the well-know Parable of the Sower and uses the every day life cycle of plants to makes it point. Within its simple agrarian reference to a farmer planting seeds, we are offered a profound insight into the nature of God's Realm. Just as life seemingly ends with death, life comes from death. The two are intertwined. With the notable exception of the story of Jesus' resurrection, this cyclical paradox is not apparent in animal and human life. Where it is apparent is in plant life, where one can easily observe life emerging from death.

Using the cycle of plant life of the wheat and barely grown in the area where Jesus lived, we observe, that unlike the GPS generated planting methods used today, the farmer of Jesus' day would have simply cast these seeds on the ground and let nature takes its course. Even with the vastly improved technological planting of today, we remain amazed that "earth produces of itself;" that life from death is inherent in and emerges from the ground we walk on.

In what may strike some as a mechanistic view of God establishing an order that lets nature takes its course, Jesus reveals that like plant life, human life has its course; that being the living souls we are follows a similar pattern. We too are products of the earth, formed by God from its soil and breathed to life by God's Spirit to become "living souls," only to die so that we might live again; a cyclical process revealed in the linked together stories of Adam's and Eve's realization of death and Jesus' realization of life being raised from death.

Within the parameters of human existence, is the inherent capacity for productivity in both the physical and spiritual nature of our soulfulness. Over time, however, that which is physical will eventually die, just like plants. "All flesh is grass," observes Isaiah. [See Isaiah 40:6-8].

This parable, however, demonstrates that physical death is only part of the story. What dies is brought to life again. Seeds may lie dormant for millennia, only to come back to life when exposed to life-giving light and nourishment. There is a potential energy in the seeds themselves; a soulfulness, if you will, observed in all living things, plants and animals alike.

While some of our scriptures and a good deal of theology and doctrine derived from them portray death as a curse that resulted from our primeval parents' one act of sin, the Sowing Seeds Parable suggests otherwise. Perhaps the curse of death is not that physical life has an end but rather that we humans **know** it will end. Jesus died and would have died even if he wasn't crucified. Death is a natural part of life and is essential for a life cycle to exist.

All physical life dies at some point. Even planets and stars die, while at the same time new planets and stars are being created. Today, we have the ability to observe such activities through astronomical technology; something the writers of our scriptures did not have available to them, and we know that stars have been dying long before life showed up on earth, which prompts one to consider whether one moment of transgression by two humans caused universal death? It makes one wonder how our scriptures might have been written had their authors known what we know today.

Jesus' Sowing Seed Parable suggests that death is at the service of the creator and the act of creation; that death serves as the means to bring forth abundance; that death is an intricate part of the kenotic paradox of God expending God's self to expand God's self, what Jesus referred to as the Kingdom of Heaven. The Realm of God is all around. We are already in it, just not aware of it. From our perspective, life from death is a mystery and may seem implausible, until we observe plant life and see the mystery of life emerging from death. Paul perhaps states and sums up this mystery best:

"Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

'Death has been swallowed up in victory.'

Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?'

The sting of death is sin (knowing - nw), and the power of sin (knowing-nw) is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." [1 Corinthians 15:51-57 NRSV]

Amen