

Mark 4: 26-34

²⁶ Then Jesus said, “This is what God’s kingdom is like. It’s as though someone scatters seed on the ground, ²⁷ then sleeps and wakes night and day. The seed sprouts and grows, but the farmer doesn’t know how. ²⁸ The earth produces crops all by itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full head of grain. ²⁹ Whenever the crop is ready, the farmer goes out to cut the grain because it’s harvesttime.”

³⁰ He continued, “What’s a good image for God’s kingdom? What parable can I use to explain it?”

³¹ Consider a mustard seed. When scattered on the ground, it’s the smallest of all the seeds on the earth; ³² but when it’s planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all vegetable plants. It produces such large branches that the birds in the sky are able to nest in its shade.”

³³ With many such parables he continued to give them the word, as much as they were able to hear. ³⁴ He spoke to them only in parables, then explained everything to his disciples when he was alone with them.

Ezekiel 17:22-24

²² Thus says the Lord God: I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out. I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs; I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. ²³ On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind. ²⁴ All the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord. I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the Lord have spoken; I will accomplish it.

Jesus often teaches using parables so when we read a parable we want to keep in mind just what that form of speech involves. A parable is a way of contrasting two things by putting them together, side by side to illustrate their similarities and differences.

Eugene Peterson calls parables, “narrative time bombs” – that are meant to undermine our assumptions about reality and offer us a vision of something different.

Comparisons in parables are unpredictable. They call into question what are normally accepted “truths.” They are almost always subversive and challenging and push us to consider that what God is up to in our world may **not** be what we expected.

The second thing to keep in mind is just what Jesus is trying to teach about here. He’s using a parable to describe the kingdom of God, but kingdom sounds like a place, almost a geographic location. It’s been understood to describe heaven, a **place** where we hope to go when we die. But that’s only part of the picture. If we think that heaven is the entirety of the kingdom of reign of God, we miss the sense of energy and immediacy of the word. The kingdom of God, sometimes translated “reign of God” describes the **places where God’s activity and influence are unmistakable**. That will be that time we call heaven for sure, but it can be here and now, as well, at least imperfectly.

So we hear in the first reading from the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel that God’s reign will look like a mighty cedar planted by God sheltering all kinds of birds. We hear that God will raise up

the low and bring down the high; that God will do as God sees fit even drying up that which is living and giving life to that which is dying. But, when **Jesus** comes along he describes God's reign not as a lush and impressive cedar but as essentially a shrub that grows like a weed. What's going on here Jesus' first hearers must have asked... and so should we! What is Jesus trying to teach us about God's reign? What does Jesus want us to notice? What is he subverting? What is he trying to startle us into understanding?

Jesus wants us to consider that God's reign isn't like any ordinary seed. In some ways it resembles a *mustard* seed; tiny and easily overlooked, but tough and persistent. Where Jesus lived, mustard was like a common and hardy weed. It could pop up almost anywhere and take over. **We** might imagine God's reign like a blackberry bush: it takes over wherever it gets a foothold and it's tough to get rid of; but it has its uses. Mustard in Jesus' day was used as medicine and other things but it was so common no one would plant it on purpose. So, Jesus is saying God's reign is not a cash crop. But *it grows*. It's tough to get rid of it and it has its purposes. It's going to show up in unexpected places, maybe even in our well-tended garden or our neat and tidy yard. Maybe we should be careful what we're praying for when we say, "Your kingdom come..."

Jesus paints a picture of the reign of God that messes with our ideas of what is 'normal', what is to be expected of God; what we should value. Like a fast growing and resilient plant, it will get into everything. It will bring life and color to desolate places. It will crowd out other concerns. It will resist our manipulations. Its humble appearance will make obvious the pride and pretentiousness that we so often hide behind. Some people will want to burn it all down trying to restore order; but weeds cannot be so easily eradicated. Burn one blackberry patch and it just pops up somewhere else.

So, what does that weedy reign of God look like in **our** world? We've translated the mustard shrub into blackberry bushes, so here and now where does the world look the way God wants it to look? Where do we see God's people treating each other as God wants us to? Where is it obvious that God's dream for humanity is being lived, even if imperfectly in our place and time? Where do we get glimpses of this even as we long for it to be more fully realized?

Well, Jesus' followers were living as an oppressed people subject to the laws and whims of an empire that cared only that order be maintained, keeping the flow of money and goods coming into Rome. That was all the backwater colony of Israel meant to Rome. So, it was dangerous to be a people motivated by Jesus' teaching that the highest good; the sure sign of God's reign was to love their neighbor. Even more dangerous when that neighbor is defined by Jesus as the neighbor who was hungry, the neighbor who was thirsty, the neighbor in prison or poor or the stranger. Loving those people is always dangerous; it's always weedy behavior to refuse to follow the dictates of the powerful and side with the powerless.

We see this weedy behavior whenever we walk with the powerless, even into the halls of power. So yesterday there was a march and vigil in Aberdeen, part of the nationwide Poor People's Campaign to bring light to the situation in our own community in which hundreds of people live outside or in unstable housing conditions. The march was organized locally by Pastor Sarah Monroe and Chaplains on the Harbor but people came from around the state and the nation, including the bishop of the Episcopal Diocese in Seattle and the presiding bishop of the whole Episcopal Church, Bishop Curry of the recent royal wedding fame.

Weedy people call out the status quo, naming the truth that while business is important, it is not **more** important than people. Weedy behavior names those who live outside or in cars or campers or those who couch surf or stay with relatives who might be dangerous or unpredictable; weedy people name them all our neighbor who we are called to see as human beings as much beloved by God as those who own homes and businesses and pay taxes. Weedy people hold communities to higher standards that ask not only for businesses to be valued but that all human beings be valued.

We see God's reign when we call out elected officials for misusing the Bible, cherry-picking one verse and using it to silence people; even using it in a way that claims that whatever they, the people in power do, good or evil is God ordained. God's people are admonished by the apostle Paul in Romans 13 to "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God." But, weedy people read that **in its context**, careful not to use God's word to justify their own desires.

So, we read the chapter before the one cited where it says: Love should be shown without pretending. Hate evil, and hold on to what is good. ¹⁰ Love each other like the members of your family. Be the best at showing honor to each other. ¹¹ Don't hesitate to be enthusiastic—be on fire in the Spirit as you serve the Lord! ¹² Be happy in your hope, stand your ground when you're in trouble, and devote yourselves to prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of God's people, and welcome strangers into your home."

And we read everything in scripture in light of what Jesus called the greatest commandment: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. And Jesus already defined neighbor for us: the hungry, the poor, the imprisoned and the stranger. Anytime you hear someone cherry-picking a verse or a passage from scripture weigh it against that. If it doesn't agree with that, you should be suspicious. And if you feel confused, like you don't know what to believe because you don't understand scripture, then you should be talking to your pastor and asking that we have more Bible Studies and then you should show up.

To be clear, I am not speaking against a political party. I am not violating the separation of church and state even though the Attorney General did just that in invoking scripture as justification for the administration's actions. I am calling out a behavior that is **anti-Biblical and inhumane: taking children from their parents**. If the Attorney General wants to quote

scripture, he should look at the examples in scripture of people who separated children from their parents: Pharoah and Herod come to mind.

It's anti-biblical because it goes against every bit of scripture, too numerous to mention that says that God always takes the side of the stranger, the outcast, the marginalized, the poor and the hungry and God calls God's people to side with them as well.

But, even more fundamental than that I'm speaking out against, so called religious folks, using the Bible for their own ends. History gives us example after example of dictators who used Romans 13 trying to bring the people, but especially the churches and the clergy into line. Here is what Eric Voegelin, a German political philosopher said about that, "Hitler, the democratically elected ruler of Germany from 1933 to 1945, commanded both Catholic and Protestant Christian leaders to preach 'unconditional subjugation' to Hitler under the pretense of the Holy Bible – specifically, the Book of Romans, Chapter 13. When Hitler's aim was to disarm Germany's citizenry, Christian leadership obediently mollified their congregations with Romans 13. When Hitler's aim was to abduct dissidents in the dark quiet of the night without due process – Romans 13. When the burning flesh of her lawful neighbors manufactured the air unbreathable – Romans 13."

I am not calling the Attorney General or any elected official Hitler. I am saying, we are called as God's people to be as **gentle as doves and as wise as serpents**. We pay attention when God's beloved people are hurt and we are not silent. We pay attention when people misuse God's word and we are not silent. We are like the blackberry bush that refuses to be cut back or burned out. We keep coming back with one message:

God is love. Where there is love God is. Love your neighbor as yourself: Love your black and brown neighbor, your white neighbor; your gay or straight neighbor; your Republican or Democrat neighbor, your rich and your poor neighbor, your housed and unhoused neighbor. Anything that violates that mandate, must be named as wrong. Amen

After worship today you are invited to join me here for further discussion of this.

— *Pastor Val Metropolous*