Mark 4:26-34

26 He also said, ‘The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground,27and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.28The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.29But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.’

30 He also said, ‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?31It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth;32yet 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.’

33 With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it;34he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

**The Creeping Kingdom of God**

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How many of you remember the old Batman TV series? Do you remember the Riddler? The actor, Frank Gorshin received an Emmy nomination for the part. His whole technique was to speak in riddles to give Batman and Robin clues about his dastardly crimes in the form of riddles. By the end of the episode the caped crusader and his trusty sidekick had usually figured out the riddle and would spoil the plans of the Riddler.

But we’re not always as clever as Batman or Robin, and Jesus can be quite the Riddler. Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, and parables are like riddles – sometimes we really have to think hard to figure out the meaning. And one thing that can make parables hard to figure out is that *we don’t always like the meaning.* When asked what a good neighbor is, Jesus told a parable about a Samaritan, someone from a neighboring region with whom the people of Judah were at war, depicting the Samaritan as the only one who treated the good Jew with compassion. There were probably some folks in the crowd who had lost a son or father or husband in a Samaritan raid, and they would likely take offense at Jesus’ parable swearing that there are no good Samaritans. His message would have been as warmly received as a sermon by a pastor after 9-11 entitled “The Good Terrorist.”

The truth is that many of Jesus’ parables were not understood by the crowds who heard them, so he would explain them to his disciples later. But these guys weren’t the sharpest tools in the shed. Most of the time they couldn’t figure out what Jesus was doing or who exactly he was. They had their notion of what a Messiah should be and what a Messiah should do, and Jesus shot down those expectations, leaving them frightened and perplexed much of the time. If the disciples had such difficulty understanding Jesus, what chance do you and I have?

That may be one of the points of the first parable: We don’t understand what God is doing most of the time. “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.” Even though we don’t necessarily understand how it happens, and even though we have very little to do with it, the kingdom of God grows around us. It’s like the cucumber plant that Hyesun planted in our back yard – a couple days ago I noticed that it had grown over the edge of the planter, and I thought, “When did that happen?” It doesn’t surprise me too much because I know Hyesun waters and fertilizes the garden, but there’s no mention of that in the first parable we read today. The sower seems to be sleeping a lot, and the plant grows despite *his* lack of attention to it. God’s kingdom grows up around us, whether or not whether or not we are part of the process, and we should be careful about taking any credit for what God does regardless of our involvement. When I step back and look at the Church today, with all its denominations, all of its controversy, and all the horrible mistakes that the Church makes (I heard on the news that the same pastor who burned Quran last year has now hanged and effigy of the President), I’m amazed that somehow, generation after generation, the church survives. Every pastor has had this experience of giving what we would consider a lousy sermon and still someone comes up and tells us in all sincerity, “Thank you. Your message really moved me.” Then when they tell us what they heard, we’re equally amazed because we don’t recall saying anything of the sort! And this kind of experience serves to remind us that when we give what we think is an excellent sermon, we should be humbled and recognize that it may have had no positive effect on any of the listeners. We need to be reminded again and again of Jesus’ words, “Apart from me you can do nothing.” There are plenty of reasons why people do not come to church; what is amazing is that new people *do* come to church, and they do so despite all the feuding and fussing and politics and jealousy and corruption and ineptitude found in the Church.

While the first parable tells us that the kingdom of God grows around us whether we tend to it or not, the second parable, the Parable of the Mustard Seed, tells us that we may not even recognize what the kingdom of God looks like…or worse, we may see the kingdom as a nuisance. Are any of you familiar with kudzu? Kudzu was originally from Japan and was introduced to the United States in 1876 at the Japanese pavilion during the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. It’s now commonly seen along roadsides, and is spreading at a rate of 150,000 acres per year, choking out all the rest of the plant life under it. Jesus tells us in his second parable that God’s kingdom is like a mustard seed that grows into a great shrub that provides shade and nesting for many birds. A farmer would not find such a metaphor very appealing; mustard plants were weeds, a nuisance plant with roots that choked crops and robbed the soil of nutrients. It was like kudzu, creeping into places that is was not welcome. It was a plant that needed to be eradicated. Allowing it to grow meant that the “good” plants would be threatened, and nesting birds would have been a further nuisance to the farmers who were no doubt a part of the crowd listening to Jesus. People would have been much more comfortable with this story if Jesus had used a magnificent cedar of Lebanon to illustrate how grand the kingdom of God was. But a mustard plant? We don’t want that kind of a plant anywhere near *our* garden. And that’s the point Jesus is making; the kingdom of God is not something many of us would welcome, yet it begins as a tiny seed and creeps into our yards and gardens against our wishes. If you think that you have insulated yourself from the problems of the world, from the injustice and the hunger and the corruption and fighting, or (worse) if you benefit from the injustice or the corruption or the conflict, the kingdom of God will not appeal to you in the least. If, on the other hand, you hope for a better world, where justice is not approximate but complete, where people can be fully trusted, where you don’t need locks, or fences, or weapons, where there is trust, and charity, and compassion, then be encouraged by this creeping kingdom of God.

Do you see the kingdom of God invading this world? Do you see people building hospitals for neglected populations? Do you see clean water being supplied to communities that used to be racked by death and disease? Do you see children being taught to read and write rather than to shoot a rifle? Do you see women being educated and respected rather than being oppressed and abused? Do you see hope invading a situation that appeared to be hopeless? And do you sense the kingdom of God creeping into your heart? Is it prompting you to repent or forgive or change your attitude, to carry your compassion to new levels? Trust that God is working in you as he works within the world, bringing about that inevitable kingdom.