

"Teaching Trust"
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Edina Morningside Community Church; January 19, 2020

Mark 4:1-34

Again [Jesus] began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." And he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that

*'they may indeed look, but not perceive,
and may indeed listen, but not understand;
so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.'"*

And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold."

He said to them, "Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand? For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" And he said to them, "Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you. For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."

He 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.

Denise Levertov's poem "The Avowal" memorably captures the trust in unseen grace at the heart of Christian faith. She writes, *As swimmers dare*

*to lie face to the sky
and water bears them,*

*as hawks rest upon air
and air sustains them,
so would I learn to attain
freefall, and float
into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,
knowing no effort earns
that all-surrounding grace.*

Jesus points to such trust in divine care in his parables of seed and soil.

Each of these parables in some way describes the divine life, what Jesus calls the Kingdom of God. Here's what it looks like, he says, when God's reign comes on earth as it is in heaven. Like a sower casting seed, and even though three-quarters of it fails to produce, the harvest yields thirty, sixty and a hundredfold. Like the earth which produces sprouting and growing grain, even in the middle of the night. Like a harvest timed just right. Like a tiny seed which grows into a great shrub. Like a plant which not only grows for itself but shelters all the birds of the air.

The story here that most catches my imagination is the one about hidden growth that happens outside of human control. Jesus says that the ways of God are like someone scattering seed on the ground, and with just that bit of human action the seed sprouts and grows. "The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head." It's comforting to know that there's a wisdom greater than humanity in the ways of seeds, soil, water and time. A farmer has a role in scattering the seed, but most of the work is done by the earth. We live in partnership and reliance on a creation that moves by its own ways.

Yet the Bible study group pointed out to me on Tuesday that this parable would go nowhere without some key actions by the farmer. Unless the seed is sown, the growth cannot happen. Without the harvest, others won't be able to share in the abundant field's delights. Most interestingly, someone said that the farmer had another job—to sleep! I took this to mean get out of the fields and trust enough to give space, not fixate on whether or not the growth is happening. That is the appropriate work of the farmer: planting what seed is ours to plant, then getting out of the way and trusting God with the growth. The young British entrepreneur Steven Bartlett [wrote on Twitter](#) this month: "You wouldn't plant a seed and then dig it up every few minutes to see if it has grown. So why do you keep questioning yourself, your hard work and your decisions? Have patience, stop overthinking and keep watering your seeds."

The kingdom of God manifests, then, with equal parts of patient trust and vital action. The kingdom of God is paradoxical like that. Part of a [prayer named for the martyred bishop Oscar Romero](#) summarizes this well: "We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest." Our efforts today to care for the planet, to show mercy in the face of poverty, to advocate for peace in this time of national and global strife—these efforts all *matter* even when we can't see their full significance for ourselves or for the whole creation at this moment. Such acts are seeds of mystery, of sowing God's realm on earth as it is in heaven. To forgive beyond what is asked, turn the other cheek, love even the enemy and give beyond what we ought. These ways are not plain or apparent to people. They are not even understandable for some. But they are seeds of divine life that God has entrusted to the world, and to us. Jesus promises as much in the parable of mysterious midnight growth, the tiny seed becoming something great, and a bountiful harvest beyond all imagining. God will take care of the growth, and it's on us to do the part that's before us. "Take the first step in faith," says Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step." So then take the next steps in faithful efforts for peace, justice, compassion and hope, pair it in equal measure with rest and trust in God, then let yourself be carried by the grace that will see us all through. Amen.