

Sermon TUMC – May 12, 2013 – Michele Rae Rizoli

SEEDS

The next two parables you are going to hear are the seeds that are being planted this morning. They will be sowed several times. I invite you to plant them in your imagination, listen for a word or a phrase that catches your attention and to wonder.

Look, let anyone who has ears to hear listen!

But be careful, if we really get it, Jesus warns that we might turn our life around and be forgiven. (adapted Mark 4.9,12)

(note: during the sermon different storytellers told the scripture passages, using different interpretations each time)

Parable of the Growing Seed (Mark 4:26-29)

[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.'

Parable of the Mustard Seed (Mark 4:30-32)

[Jesus] 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.'

There's something that has always kind of bothered me about how the gospels tell us what Jesus taught. The gospel writers just say he taught using parables and then they tell us the parable. But they rarely tell us about the content of Jesus' teachings, that is, what the parables *mean*. Did they think that the parable is enough? Is it?

I love the parables, but I find I want to know *what* Jesus taught not *how*. This gave me pause as I prepared the sermon. Walter Brueggemann talks about how our "technical way of thinking reduces mystery to problem, transforms assurance into certitude, revises quality into quantity, and so takes the categories of biblical faith and represents them in manageable shapes."¹ He considers this a great loss. Is that what I'm doing?

¹ Walter Brueggemann, Finally Comes the Poet.

Brueggemann invites us to think more in terms of poetry, noticing the unsettling parts, the parts that are inviting us toward transformation, keeping things open without tying up the loose ends.

What if we used the same approach as Jesus and just told parables and let them have their way with us as story, as poetry? What would happen?

(Second telling)

'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.'

[Jesus] 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.'

To be fair even the disciples in the inner circle were at a bit of a loss on what to do with parables. In the passage we read earlier about the parable of the sower, Jesus looked over at their puzzled faces and observed, "You don't get it, do you?" One can almost hear the exasperation in his voice: "If you don't get this one, then how will you understand all the parables?" (v.13) And he begrudgingly goes on to give them the familiar explanation about how people hear the word of God (he still doesn't give us any content on exactly what that might be either, by the way). Indeed, how will we understand the parables?

In these seed parables Jesus mentions he's trying to capture a good comparison to the kingdom of God, but we don't really know what aspect of the farmers or the seeds are being compared.

"Is it the focus on patience of the farmer during the time of growth? Is it that the plant grows independently of human effort? Is it that the plant grows irresistibly once it is sown? Is it that the plant must go through different stages before harvest can come?" Is it about final judgment? Discernment? Preparation?²

If Jesus or the gospel writer were right here, right now, their answer would probably be resounding: What do *you* think?

² Timothy J. Geddert, Believers Church Bible Commentary, Mark.

That's the whole point of parables. The part where you scratch your head and wonder is exactly the effect a parable is supposed to have on us. The questions it raises, the comparisons it evokes, the amusement at finding out what happens next, the frustration with "not the seed thing again."

Jesus and the gospel writer are using an ancient and ubiquitous method of storytelling, which our logical and concrete-thinking culture has largely lost. Aboriginal elders still use this method; Jewish rabbis still use it, wise people still use it. Try asking them a question and you'll always get a story for an answer. (Sadly, some of us no longer have ears to hear and eyes to see through story.)

Storytelling operates to get our attention on a whole bunch of different levels:

- listeners are being entertained,
- they are forming a relationship with the storyteller and each other,
- creating their own imaginary world,
- they are engaged in their own meaning-making,
- and they are being given a way to learn and remember. Incidentally, these particular parables about seeds obviously made an impression on the gospel writers, because they all retell them in some way or another.

Like with a good joke, too much explaining, takes all the fun out of it, even if you've heard it before. So, although this is supposed to be a sermon, I will try to refrain from assigning *my* meaning to the parables.

I *will* give you some of my thoughts along the way. But it might just prove to be um..., "organic fertilizer." I'll leave it up to you to decide. Let's let the stories themselves take seed.

(Third telling – Mark 4.26-29)

'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.'

A few things to consider...

What kind of seed is growing in the field? What kind of soil was it?

As you think about this past week of Spring and how one day the flowers weren't there and the next time you looked they were in full bloom, can you imagine how it's possible the sower didn't really notice the plants growing? All of a sudden, it was harvest time. How is that like God at work in the world? How is that like God at work in your own life this week?

Are we the sower, or the seed or the field?

Is this about God planting the kingdom in us?

(Third telling – Mark 4.30-32)

‘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.’

What did Jesus mean by Kingdom of God?

Many people now prefer to speak of the realm of God because of the negative connotations of domination systems like kingdoms. My United Church colleagues often talk about the kin-dom of God to capture the communal aspects of what Jesus was proclaiming. Either way, what is this illusive dimension that Jesus is trying to capture by comparison and metaphor? What are we being invited to discern?

Well, here’s another thing about Jesus’ teaching, it wasn’t only through parables. We now know that people learn as much or more through observation as through words and explanations. If you’re my kid and I tell you not to speak with your mouth full, but am constantly speaking with my mouth full, chances are, you’ll learn to speak with your mouth full. So it is with values, attitudes towards violence, swear words, habits. Actions convey the content, not the words.

Yes, Jesus talked about the realm of God through parables, but he mostly *lived* the realm of God

- by recruiting followers and creating a community – Come, follow me!
- by interpreting the spirit of scripture with authority, -- You’ve heard it said, but I say
- by calling people to genuine religious expression, -- The Sabbath was made for people, not the other way around.
- by driving out the forces of evil,
- by healing the sick,
- associating with outcasts,
- accepting sinners,
- pronouncing forgiveness,
- challenging the status quo,
- renewing the people of God.

The kingdom of God is not overt teaching with words, but teaching for those who have eyes to see and ears to listen.³ Jesus’ teaching is about learning a way of life that sometimes just can’t be put into words. It’s too organic to be nailed down, except maybe by organic metaphors.

³ Adapted from Geddert.

What *can* you discern about the realm of God through these parables? What makes you wonder?

(Fourth telling)

'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.'

'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.'

What does the parable make you think about small beginnings and a large spread? What does it mean that Jesus is referencing a plant that can be messy and go out of control, a weed? A mustard plant that can be used as spice, as decoration, as herbal remedy? A plant that can range from small plant to a full field of yellow, to a unruly giant bush?

I cringed a bit when I saw the poster for the MCEC conference with a design of a dandelion. A pesky but beautiful dandelion? Is that what the kingdom of God is like?

During the recent MCEC meetings, César García, from Colombia, who is General Secretary of Mennonite World Conference made a presentation on this parable of the mustard seed, which you can see and hear online.⁴ He makes some very interesting points. The one I found most intriguing was his observation that seeds only really serve their function once they hit the ground and interact with it. Get dirty, absorb some of the dirt to themselves, become changed by their context. He also observed how different seeds behave differently in different soil contexts.

I immediately thought of rubber plants that are used as decorative potted plants here in Canada, but at our house in Brazil they grew to be so big the roots were tearing up the sidewalk. Different soils, different contexts, different outcomes and effects. How does this compare to the realm of God?

(Fifth telling)

'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.'

⁴ <http://www.mcec.ca/content/annual-church-gathering25th-anniversary>

Whatever this farming parable is saying about plants, it seems clear that it is talking about how a little becomes a lot, about “small obscure beginnings and an amazing end result”⁵ that provides unexpected shelter to great diversity, i.e. all kinds of birds.

When we were hearing about the last TUMC space task force, I remember Bruce Pope kept on asking us how can we use our space at TUMC for kingdom purposes. That particular way of asking the question of our mission as a church stuck with me. It’s a great question to keep at the forefront. There is an often-quoted phrase in seminary that says that “God’s church doesn’t have a mission, God’s mission has a church.”⁶ So in this understanding, we as God’s church are/have been/continue to be scattered seed; or maybe farmers that just watch things grow; or maybe the birds that take shelter in someone else’s plant.

Friends, these parables are the seeds we’re planting today. May they scatter in your imagination and grow in you this week.

Sixth telling

‘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.’

‘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.’

⁵ Richard B. Gardner (yup, a gardener talking about seed parables), Believers Church Commentary, Matthew.

⁶ I’m not clear on how to attribute this quote.