

Happy Father's Day. I hope that you will join me for a cup of coffee after the service as we continue our conversation begun last week about the results of our C.A.T. Survey. I am curious to hear your thoughts.

This morning we encounter a couple of short parables in Mark; I love them for their brevity. They are simple and straight forward. They pack a punch. In this case, I'd describe that punch as a kind of quiet, dynamic confidence. And I think they might speak to us as we revision our future at St. Thomas's.

So, what exactly is a parable? Well, it's not an analogy for us to figure out, where for example A=God and B=Jesus and C=us. Some parables do function this way, but they are not generally a hidden message for us to decipher. They are also not morality tales or fables. There is rarely a moral at the end for us to apply. Again, some parables certainly have ethical implications, but they're not pearls of wisdom Jesus is dispensing like a self-help coach.

Eugene Peterson calls parables, "narrative time bombs" that are meant to undermine our assumptions of the various "givens" and "realities" that we accept unquestioningly and offer us a vision of something different. "Parable" comes from two Greek words, *para*, "beside," and *ballein*, "to throw." A parable is then throwing one thing (a vision of God's kingdom) beside another (the world as it is) to see what happens. Comparisons are unpredictable – sometimes subtle, sometimes obvious, sometimes something to mull over. And because they call into question accepted "truths," they are always a bit subversive, goading us to consider other possibilities in light of God's promises.

Parables often begin, "the Kingdom of God is like..." The challenge with this translation to English is that "kingdom" can seem static as if describing some fixed place. The Greek, *basileia*, is far more dynamic: it can describe the arenas of God's activity and influence. And therefore many translations use "the reign" or "rule" of God to highlight that more active dimension of the word. (We do the same with the church: we first think of it as a building or place and sometimes forget it is a dynamic community).

Ultimately, parables take a qualitative view – when we see the world as God does, and when we act toward each other as God would have us, we are living in God's rule. That means that we can experience and enact the kingdom here and now as well as recognize that even our best efforts fall short of God's vision. We quickly realize that God's activity and reign is not yet fully present among us.

These two parables fall right into that interesting, even exciting, "now and not yet" dimension of God's reign. As seeds grow without our effort, so also will God bring about God's reign. It is not up to us. We can't make it happen. Nor can we prevent it. God is ultimately responsible for bringing God's rule and reign to bear. This is sheer promise. And it is also a little discomfoting, especially when we realize – as we've seen in recent weeks – that God's rule and reign, God's concern and activity is on behalf of *everyone*, even those who look or believe or think differently than we do. We can't bring God's reign of redemptive and surprising love and grace, and we cannot control it or domesticate it. And we definitely can't stop it! In this sense, it is more like the mustard plant that, like an out of control weed, grows and spreads and can hardly be contained, even if you're not sure you want it.

It's an unsettling promise...at least if you think about it. Kind of like the petition we so regularly pray, "*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.*" Do we really want God's rule and will to be enacted among us? Probably when we or a loved one is sick, hurting, or in need. But so often we're

content with things as they are that we mouth those words with no actual desire that they come true. What would it be like if we came to the altar today and hold out our empty hands to receive the bread and at the same time we pray “Your kingdom come in me; your will be done in me?”

This parable should shake us up and awakening us to the promise that God is on the move – in our life, in our community, in the world – and that God will in time complete the work God has started. In the meantime, we’re invited to enact God’s reign wherever we are, acting in the confidence that God’s promises are true. This means that when things are going well, we can take delight in being more aligned with God’s will and ways. It means that when life is hard, when we meet resistance, or when we fail or fall far short of our hopes, we can take refuge in the promise that God is still at work and has not given up on us or the world.

We cannot measure the strength or validity of God’s promises based on our efforts, but rather allow the promises of the God who created light out of darkness and raised Jesus from the dead to give us a quiet and resilient confidence to take joy when we see God’s reign lived out and to be encouraged and empowered to keep faith when we don’t.

In this sense, the old adage “*–work like it s all up to you, and pray like it s all up to God*” – might describe every element of our life of faith. Let us throw ourselves into the opportunities and challenges ahead of us with equal measures of delight and resolve. We keep at it knowing that God is with us and for us, and we give it our all, knowing that no work done in love is ever lost and that God, in time, will draw all things together for good.

I invite you to turn to page 540 and pray with me.

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquillity the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Rev. Paul Briggs
4th Sunday After Pentecost, 16 June 2024
St. Thomas’ Church, Camden, Maine