

“Too Small to Impress, Too Great to Fail”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

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Based upon 1 Sam. 15:34-16:13; Mark 4:26-32

In the Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn classic murder mystery, “*Charade*,”¹ Hepburn’s character, Reggie, falls for Grant’s character, (who goes by several names), on a ski trip. She goes home ready to tell her husband that she wants a divorce, only to be notified by the police that her husband, who was not the man she thought he was, had been murdered. The murderer, according to a man at the U.S. Embassy, is probably one of three creepy men who showed up at her husband’s funeral. They are all looking for a treasure they know her husband had hidden away. What follows is a wild, confusing, funny, and sometimes scary quest by everyone involved to figure out who is the murderer and who has the missing fortune. The only things the husband left behind in an overnight bag were a plane ticket, a bunch of fake passports, some toiletries, and a letter he wrote to his wife but hadn’t mailed. The more everyone looks, the more frustrated they become, until the murderer starts killing the suspects one by one. It isn’t until the end of the film, (spoiler alert), when Reggie and Grant’s character are walking through a park filled with vendors selling collector stamps, that they realize that they have had the money with them all the time in the form of the stamps on the un-mailed envelope. They had been thinking of a fortune in terms of dollar bills, gold bars, bank accounts, or expensive belongings. It didn’t occur to them that something as small as a stamp could be worth so much. So, they hadn’t really paid any attention to them.

It’s a great film, but an even better lesson for us to remember as we seek the invaluable treasure that we call the Kingdom of God on earth. As I noted last week, we are living during a time when there is so much trouble in our world that it can be hard to see evidence of the Kingdom of God around us. Jesus said the Kingdom of God was “at hand” or “nearby” two thousand years ago. Surely by now you’d think that we could see and experience it better, right? But if the meek are blessed in the Kingdom of God, and truth and righteousness reign there, if love and grace are the currency, and healing and hope are all around, then it’s not irrational if you have concluded that either the Kingdom is not real, or not here because our world right now definitely is not like that. I know I said last week that we have to witness to God’s truth to protect the Kingdom, and that is still true. But it is especially hard to witness to what you cannot see or feel, and sometimes it can feel as though the Kingdom has already crumbled to such a degree that whatever Jesus was talking about must already be gone.

Mercifully, the Lectionary texts for this Sunday have just what we need to pull us out of such despairing thoughts and remind us that the Kingdom is indeed real and still all around us. Hope comes in the form of a series of agricultural parables in the *Gospel of Mark*. Now if you could ask Mark today what the world was like when he was writing about the good news of the in-breaking of the Kingdom, he would not say, “It was like living in heaven on earth because the Kingdom of God was so dramatically visible.” Brian Blount, President of Union seminary, and

¹ *Charade*, a 1963 film directed by Stanley Donen, written by Peter Stone and Marc Behm, and starring Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn, also featured Walter Matthau, James Coburn, George Kennedy, Dominique Minot, Ned Glass, and Jacques Marin in the cast.

Bible expert on *Mark*, has written that the best adjectives to describe the world in Mark's day are "demonic, catastrophic, murderous, self-destructive, terrified, apocalyptic, and hopeless."² Mark wrote during a time when the Romans had just destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and people thought the end of the world had begun. He wrote about a time when people believed in demon-possession, lived in poverty, and experienced injustice and oppression every day.

This was the time of the disciples. According to Mark, Jesus came into this time and said, "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand." (*Mk.* 1:14-15). When you think about it, it's truly miraculous that he wasn't laughed out of town. But then again, he sort of was. In the chapter right before today's lesson we learn that people believed Jesus must have been possessed by Beelzebul because he was going around claiming that he could heal people, calling disciples to follow him, and insisting that Mary and his brothers were not his true family, those who served God were. (*Mk.* 3:20-30). "Sorry Mary," the people said shaking their heads. "Your boy has clearly lost it. Nice boy. But 'the Kingdom of God is at hand'? Yea, right."

Jesus knew that if he was going to keep his followers, he had some explaining to do. So according to Chapter Four, from which we get our Lectionary text, Jesus stepped into a boat on the edge of the sea of Galilee and set about managing the people's expectations of the Kingdom. Mark thought that it was so important that his readers appreciate that Jesus did this by the sea that he mentions it three times in the span of one verse. "Jesus was beside the sea. He got into a boat on the sea. He taught the crowd beside the sea on the land." (*Mk.* 4:1). "Oh gee, did I mention that all this took place on the edge of the sea?" This detail was important because in Mark's gospel the sea stands for everything dark and dangerous. It stands for the demonic force of chaos.³ God conquered that chaos to a degree in *Genesis* by separating the land from the watery deep. But in *Mark* the sea is still an anti-God, threatening symbol. Metaphorically speaking, people in his day lived "by the sea" whether they lived near water or not. So do we.

Mark's symbol of trouble, the sea, bookends Chapter Four. But in the end of the chapter, when the sea threatens the disciples' lives, Jesus tames the storm at sea with a single word. So immediately that tells us that Mark intended this to be an encouraging chapter about how God in Jesus will conquer the threatening darkness. It's going to be a literary hope sandwich, which Mark was fond of creating, and which we need as much as the original disciples did. But the meat of the sandwich is the parables which are not about the sea. They are about seeds and what the Kingdom of God is like.

"A sower went out to sow, and as he did some seed fell on the path and some on rocky ground, and some in shallow soil and some in thorny territory," Jesus began. (*Mk.* 4:3-9). We didn't hear this parable read this morning, but we know it. This is the one where the seeds die almost everywhere because of outside threats and poor growing conditions, but on good soil they yield one hundred-fold. This is the one that especially in *Matthew's* and *Luke's* versions makes us feel like we better get out and condition our soil in a hurry. But in *Mark*, spiritual

² Blount, Brian K., *Invasion of the Dead: Preaching Resurrection* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 81-2.

³ Brian Blount says that in *Mark*, the sea is "far more than a geographical notation; it is where discipleship is challenged, where boundaries are impassable, where life always hangs in the balance, and where evil lurks as a formidable foe." Blount, Brian K., and Charles, Gary W., *Preaching Mark in Two Voices* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 60.

self-discipline is not really the point of the story, a fact which becomes clearer when the two other seed parables we heard today are read right after the first. “The Kingdom of God is as if someone scatters seed,” Jesus said. “Then he sleeps day and night, and suddenly, automatically, the seeds grow. The earth takes care of business so all the sower has to do is pay attention to when it’s harvest time.” And then again he added, “With what can we compare the Kingdom of God? It’s like a tiny mustard seed sown in the ground which grows up to become the greatest of all shrubs with large branches that shelter the birds.”

All three parables are first and foremost about what God does in the sowing seeds of good news. There are plenty of other texts in the Bible about what we need to do to dwell in or defend the Kingdom. But these three are about God. So understandably, in all of these parables the seeds flourish. They don’t flourish in the ways we would expect, however. In the first parable, a huge amount of seed is not fruitful. In the second parable, which seems almost to contradict the first, the seeds grow without much tending from anyone. In the third one, even though the seed, which is as tiny as a mustard seed, does grow exponentially large, it grows into a great shrub, not a bumper crop of wheat or a mighty cedar or sequoia.

I’ve preached before on how the last parable in particular would have troubled the Jewish farmers Jesus was trying to reach. Mustard in his day was not just the largest herb, it was also one of the largest pests for farmers because it is an invasive plant. Mustard for people in Jesus’ day was like those little violets that pop up in lawns and gardens around here, which are almost impossible to eradicate no matter how much you weed. Add to that fact the additional fact that centuries before the prophet Ezekiel had preconditioned the people to imagine the Kingdom of God as a “lofty cedar,” not a shrubbery (*Ezek. 31*), and you can see why they had a problem. Who other than Monty Python’s “Knights who say ‘Ni’” are impressed by shrubberies? So, Jesus’ parable was not persuasive to a lot of people. They weren’t dreaming of a Kingdom that was like an invasive bush.

But these lessons were really more for Jesus’ disciples than they were for the crowds. Jesus’ point to them was that they needed to keep in mind two things as they moved forward in ministry with him. The first thing was that God was going to plant the Kingdom of God on earth, not them. They might not understand how it would happen or when or where, but since it was God’s plan, it was going to happen no matter what. The second thing they needed to keep in mind was that the Kingdom was not going to be the visible in the classic sense. It was going to start small, so small that a lot of people would miss it. So, they needed to adjust their expectations, or they might think that the Kingdom was losing ground, or that God’s plan was failing when it was actually growing.

This “think small and remember God is in charge” plan is the same lesson that the Old Testament text affirms today too. God didn’t like Saul as a king for the people. So, God decided to choose someone else. But when God sent Samuel to anoint one of the sons of Jesse, God did not pick his big burly eldest who, like Saul, looked like a warrior. God did not pick any of the soldiers in the family. God picked David, who was just a boy at the time. “I don’t see people the way that you do,” God explained to Samuel. “Anoint the shepherd boy and my Kingdom will grow.”

I think sometimes we get so hung up on all the big bad stuff going on, and so hung up on whether we can stop it, that we forget that it's not our responsibility to create the Kingdom of God single-handedly. It was God's idea from the beginning, and God has so much seed that God's not going to panic if the birds get some and the thorns get some others. God doesn't fuss over the growing process. The mustard seed of the Kingdom will grow automatically and exponentially. It will start out tiny but be unstoppable. It will invade the sinful kingdoms of this world and bring with it God's healing grace and love precisely because it's not a cedar seed; it's a mustard seed, and mustard is a healing herb. Even in Jesus' day people knew that mustard could heal all kinds of problems from scorpion bites to sinus infections, tooth aches to bowel impactions. It still is used to fight some cancers today. The Kingdom will grow until someday eventually, the world will look like the mustard fields in Israel, covered with cross-shaped yellow flowers which proclaim the love and grace of God.

In the meantime, you can still see small glimpses of the Kingdom if you stop searching for cedars and look for mustard blossoms instead. The unstoppable healing grace of God is evident in the stranger who returns your lost wallet without asking for a reward, in the teacher who works overtime to help a child understand a problem, in the surprise call or text message from an old friend offering encouragement just when you need it most. The Kingdom is evident in the teenagers inventing new ways to clean up the ocean, and in the inclusivity of Millennials today. The Kingdom is visible in the daily labors of the millions who work and sacrifice not to acquire fame or power, but care for the needs of others.

My mother experienced a powerful glimpse of the Kingdom like this on a trip to Florida a year or two ago. She got her car off the auto train from Virginia, but still had 4 ½ hours to drive to get to her home on Sanibel. Then her transmission acted up. She was barely able to get the car off the road onto an exit ramp before everything froze, leaving her stuck hours from home, alone and exhausted. That's when she discovered that she had pulled over into a bright yellow patch of the Kingdom. First came a 20-something young man, not to rob her, but to stay with her until help could arrive. I guess he saw a little white-haired lady in trouble by the side of the road and wanted to help. Then came a police man to protect her and her car from harm. Then came a tow truck driver, who said, "You sounded so scared on the phone I came as soon as I could. Where can I take you?" When she told him how far she needed to go to her dealer, he said, "I know that dealer. I used to work there. I'll take you there." Then, after he towed her all the way to a dealer near her home, they not only got her all set with a loaner car while they fixed hers, they even moved everything from her car, which was packed to the gills, into the rental. So instead of feeling defeated, she got home feeling overwhelmed by the kindness of strangers and the sustaining grace of God.

Every day, all around us there are signs of the Kingdom of God. But they are small signs. As much as we might wish it would be otherwise, God is not designing the Kingdom like a strip mall contractor, clear cutting and demolishing everything that exists in one fell swoop in order to put up a whole new town center overnight. God just keeps on sowing seeds; and those seeds grow and provide shelter for those of us who need it. If you look at the arc of human history, the Kingdom is steadily growing. We are moving toward greater justice and righteousness. We are

moving toward greater inclusivity and understanding. We are just in a pretty thorny patch right now, so it's hard to see all the seeds that are taking root. Look for the love instead of the hate now, however, and you will be able to catch glimpses of the yellow. Look for the helpers instead of just fixating on the headlines. Look for the stories about mercy and goodness which are in the news every day but harder to notice. When you do you will realize that although the Kingdom of God is under attack, and does need us to defend it, it is not in danger of being destroyed. Human beings simply do not have that kind of power. The God who has the ability to quiet the chaos of the sea, the God who sees people and the world differently from how we see them, is the one who's sowing the seeds, and has no plans to stop anytime soon. Thanks be to God! Amen.