

Year B, Pentecost 4

June 17th, 2018

By Thomas L. Truby

Mark 4:26-29 and 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17 (Common English Bible, 2011)

New Things Have Arrived!

What is the Kingdom of God like, Jesus asks. Then he answers his own question. He has a clear vision but his vision is so different he must boggle people's minds for them to even have a chance of seeing it. He must start with something they all know and then infuse it with enough strangeness to get them thinking out of the box. We see this in the story of the mustard seed, a weed no farmer wants, deliberately planted in the field. They scratch their heads and puzzle on what Jesus is saying because he is talking about something they can't imagine on their own. Anything referencing the Kingdom of God comes from a place outside typical human thought.

Listen to the mystery and drama in the first two sentences of today's first story. "This is what God's kingdom is like. It's as though someone scatters seed on the ground." It could be anyone who scattered that seed and it could be any kind of seed. Jesus is setting up the story. The one who scatters the seed then sleeps and wakes night and day and we don't know how long this goes on. The story takes us out of common time and into the realm of mystery as a sense of fascination takes hold of us.

"The seed sprouts and grows, but the farmer does not know how." Jesus makes clear that even the farmer can't explain how the seed got there, sprouted and grew. There is a strange passivity here. Is the Kingdom of God like this? His story goes on.

"The earth produces crops all by itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full head of grain." Something seems to be happening organically, without human control or intervention. And it's happening by stages.

First the plant stools out and produces a clump of stalks. Each of these stalks has a head that grows up from the base through the stalk and emerges from the top. When the head first comes out it is soft, green and lacking in distinct form. But soon it pollinates and then the seed fills out producing the full head of grain.

Does God's Kingdom grow by stages? Where are we, as a species, in its growth pattern? Are we nearing harvest? Some say we are. Girard thought we were. What stage are we from the perspective of human anthropology in the context of humanities total time on earth? We are not used to thinking this way. Usually we think in terms of our own individual life span.

Along that line, come July 1st you and I have been together for twelve years. Something is mysteriously happening in us all. Has Jesus scattered some new seed while we sleep and wake night and day and it has sprouted and grown? Could this be God's kingdom doing its mysterious and powerful work in our lives as a community of faith? Whatever it is, we can't claim credit for it. It's just happening. It is like a positive virus affecting every cell of our collective body. The content of our DNA is changing at a level we can't see.

For over six years now I have been carefully writing out the sermons and sending them to a lectionary website for publication. Since we use a three year lectionary cycle I am now encountering the same scripture I used six and sometimes nine years ago. When I read what I wrote then I often can't use it. I have changed and can see things I couldn't see then. And not only do I see more, but what I see, I see more clearly. I find I can express it in my own words and therefore you find me more accessible—though I know there is still room for growth there. I think this is an example of how the Kingdom grows in us even when we are not aware of it.

The emerging head of wheat has changed from that soft green, light-weight promise of seed to a distinct head that is ripening day to day. And who knows when the harvest will be. I know the growing season of my personal life has to be toward the end of its life-cycle.

And here is another change that has happened for me in this last year. The coming end is not bad, it just is. It is not a judgement, it is just a reality. Maybe that's the meaning of harvest time. Jesus' story ends with this line, "Whenever the crop is ready, the farmer goes out to cut the grain because it's harvest time."

That's not a threat. That line can be read softly with no feeling of dread or judgement. There is no apocalyptic aftertaste. It just refers to our natural end when the farmer, beaming with love and joy, brings home the harvest.

In the second parable I think Jesus is the planter who planted the mustard seed; that seed everyone thought was a weed, and God is the one who has given the increase. Maybe Jesus didn't even know how God would use him when he scattered that wild weed but he trusted God would. Maybe God is showing us that his kingdom is not like any other; it starts out super small and grows big to where it provides shelter and shade for all of God's creatures including us. Maybe participation in his kingdom brings us home to the one who created us. Maybe the Kingdom of God is living in view of what we know is coming but getting there through faith a little early and discovering all really is well.

Paul wrote, "So we are always confident, because we know that while we are living in the body, we are away from our home with the Lord." Maybe the Kingdom of God is knowing where our true home is and orienting ourselves in that direction. Paul continues, "We live by faith and not sight. We are confident, and we would prefer to leave the body and to be at home with the Lord. So our goal is to be acceptable to him, whether we are at home or away from home."

As my theology and anthropology have matured, like the wheat in it's life cycle, I am increasingly comfortable in joining Paul who says, "The love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: one died for the sake of all; therefore, all died. He died for the sake of all so that those who are alive should live not for themselves but for the one who died for them and was raised."

Living in the awareness of the Kingdom of God changes everything because our frame of reference changes. We belong, we have a purpose, and we have a direction. We are "in" something that orients us toward things that exist outside of time: things like relationship, forgiveness and love. Again Paul expresses it beautifully:

So then, from this point on we won't recognize people by human standards. Even though we used to know Christ by human standards, that isn't how we know him now. So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!

We are discovering that the love of Christ more and more controls us and it is happening while we sleep and wake day after day. It just happens as the words and actions of Christ sown in our hearts week after week secretly germinate and grow. A swelling appears where it had not been before and it grows upward and at some point burst out. When it does, it is at first incoherent and green, not ready for seeding, but the Spirit continues to work and then seed develops, quite to our surprise. Now we do have something to share; a truth, a perspective different from any we have had before. It just happens as we take in the grace of God. As Paul says, "Old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!" Amen.