



Welcome to our Eucharistic Celebration

The Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

June 17, 2018

St. Mary of the Assumption Parish

Today's Themes in Scripture

It takes faith to trust that God will do what he has promised.

For the Israelites in Ezekiel's day, it would have been hard to trust the prophet, who was a captive in Babylon alongside them. More loss was on the way, with the coming destruction of the Temple. The prophet blamed Israel for this, because of their faithlessness. Yet, after such bleak messages, Ezekiel delivered a promise: God will restore what has been lost for those who put their faith in him again. But the promise comes wrapped in poetry: God will grow a mighty tree from a transplanted, fragile shoot. That is all they hear. It is short on details like how and when-- the very things that humans want to hear when it comes to promises. Waiting for God to keep his promises under bleak circumstances takes a determined, courageous faith.

In the Gospel, Jesus teaches about the mystery of God's kingdom comparing it to the imperceptible ways that seeds seem to grow, and to a mustard seed which starts out small but grows into something mighty. To those who have not placed their trust in him, he will only speak in parables. To his disciples, he explains his meaning. Jesus tells them that God's actions in achieving his will often happen outside human awareness. Even they do not know how God will establish the kingdom Jesus has come to announce. Still, they trust Jesus who tells them that God is in control of all the details-- those they might see and those they can't.

When St. Paul wrote his second letter to the Corinthians, he still believed that Jesus would return soon to take his disciples to heaven with him. Paul was torn between wanting to go with Jesus and remaining "in his body" where he was at home. Even so, no challenge mattered as much to St. Paul as pleasing God in all circumstances, so that he could face Jesus at the final judgment and be found blameless.

Each of us has been invited to take our place in the Kingdom of God. We cannot always see the kingdom being built up around us, or inside us. We must put our faith in Jesus' words that God complete what he has started. He will bring to harvest what he has sown. Trusting this is walking by faith: it takes courage to walk a path we cannot see.

Sunday Readings and Backgrounds

Reading I: Ezekiel 17:22-24

I will plant it. It shall put forth branches and bear fruit.

- Twice we hear the words "I will plant."
- God makes promises and keeps them.
- God will rebuild the Davidic dynasty; then people will know that God can restore a people's destiny.
- What God restores will put forth branches and bear fruit.

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 92: 2-3, 13-14, 15-16

Lord it is good to give thanks to you.

Reading II: 2 Corinthians 5:6-10

Walk by faith and not by sight.

- The Apostle uses the word "home" to explain how we really belong to Christ instead of the world where we live and work.
- The Lord is the distant homeland, believed in, but unseen.
- At judgment, we will be revealed as we truly are.
- We shall be valued not by our earthly monuments but by our imitation of the Lord who emptied himself and left behind no earthly possessions.

Gospel: Mark 4:26-34

Through Jesus will come the Kingdom of God.

- Only Mark records this parable of the seed's growth.
- Here are two parables about growth from seed to full blooming plant. Sower and harvester are the same.
- The Kingdom of God develops quietly yet powerfully until it is fully bloomed.
- The Kingdom of God was initiated by Jesus.

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A Wildly Fruitful Plan

In today's Gospel, Jesus is going to challenge us with two puzzling parables. He created these early in his ministry to summarize his teachings about the coming of the kingdom of God. The first is not good news for autonomous activists, loner cowboys or determined do-it-yourselfers. This is the only parable in the Gospel of Mark that neither Matthew nor Luke copied into their own Gospels. Apparently, it was unpopular from the get-go.

Jesus' parable about the farmer who gets to sleep late even seems to subvert the first commandment God gave humanity: "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28). This parable tells us that in the kingdom of God, after people scatter the seed, there is nothing more they can or should do until the earth yields the harvest. Any farmers who have survived a few seasons will take issue with that. There's very little that's laid-back about agriculture. Tending the land is a full-time occupation from the day of planting until the harvest has been gathered — and then some. Jesus knew that well.

Jesus also knew that he was called to make present the reign of God but that his preaching in word and deed had quickly won him mortal enemies who had the power to carry out their malevolent intentions. His words were intended to plant seeds and remove weeds. His way of welcoming others, his healing activities, his way of seeking out the poor and outcast were offered like water on thirsty ground. But his work didn't seem to be producing a harvest.

Whether it was his own question about the effect of his efforts or his disciples' impatience for results that led him to weave this parable, it presents a challenging proposal for his disciples throughout time. When we look at it carefully, Jesus was not telling his disciples to sit back and do nothing. But he was telling them that the object of their hope and the results of their work were beyond their control.

Unlike a five-year business plan with regular reviews and measurements of progress, God's grace cannot be plotted out or even harnessed the way a sail captures the wind. Trying to force the growth of grace is as futile as yanking on a plant to make it grow faster or trying to raise ourselves above the ground by pulling up on our own hair. If Jesus' success with the religious authorities of his day is any example, there's not even a sure-fire formula for creating an atmosphere congenial to God's reigning. It's out of our hands.

This leaves committed disciples in the paradoxical position of desiring to do everything possible to bring God and neighbor together, knowing all the while that they are ultimately powerless. Ironically, that is exactly where Jesus wants his disciples. It puts them where they belong, behind him, following his lead as he trusts in the Father.

That is the message of the second parable — the crazy saying about the mustard seed. Jesus was telling his followers that although they couldn't do anything to establish the kingdom, God had a wildly fruitful plan already in operation. Jesus explained that they couldn't see or understand it but that was because the kingdom of God is as unmanageable and prolific as a weed. All they had to do was trust. To some that is a major problem; to others it is a promise.

The kingdom of God will be a problem to everyone who wants to maintain control — be it of their own spiritual growth, their family, friends, community or the world. On the other hand, the very unruliness of God's reign sounds like a boundless promise of continual surprises to people who realize that even their wildest dreams are paltry compared to what God has in mind.

Perhaps, what Jesus was saying to his disciples with these parables was, "I know what's happening now doesn't look like what you're expecting. That's because you suffer from a congenital disability in the realm of hope. If you will abandon your carefully planned little scenarios and stop clinging to your self-limiting autonomy, you can be really free, and you will get a glimpse of what God is carrying out while your attention has been fixated elsewhere."

One of the greatest challenges the Gospels give us is to drop our expectations so that we can be open to God's possibilities. St. Paul tells us that God's plan is infinitely greater than we can imagine. In the end, trusting God's plan and timetable may ask more of us than all the things we might think we should or could do to make God's kingdom come.

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