

Next: Today and Tomorrow

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Mark 4:26-32

He 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."

He 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." Mark 4:26-32 (NRSV)

Let's pray together. *Gracious God, open us up, open our eyes that we might see whatever you have for us. Open our ears that we might hear your word that's somewhere in the midst of these words. Open our hearts, God, even if they have to break open so that your word might fall in. And then, O God, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

So when my kids were small, we watched the movie "Annie" all the time. It had a song titled "Tomorrow" and it went "Tomorrow, tomorrow, I love you tomorrow, you're only a day away." It is a song that is both at the same time endearing and annoying, and both inspiring and offensive. It's offensive to us because we think that you live in a make-believe world. There's that Pollyanna look that you carry with you. You look at this world through rose colored glasses all the time. There are bad things out there.

What do you think is the appropriate attitude of a follower of Jesus toward the future? All year we've been saying that the appropriate attitude of a follow of Jesus towards the past and towards the present is gratitude. Just a sense of gratitude for whatever God gives us.

What is the appropriate attitude of the follower of Jesus toward the future? Well, I would say that there's one word - and that word is hope, that we are a people of hope. That hope is what drives us forward.

These two parables that we heard today, that we read, are both parables about how the Kingdom of God is planted and is growing around us, is emerging. Sometimes along with our work and sometimes without our work, the Kingdom of God is growing around us. We are to see it, to experience this Kingdom that God is working to bring about.

Now of course there are bad things, and of course there is pain, but the Scripture uses a particular image - Paul does, to talk about what that pain is all about. You've read it, it's in a very familiar chapter to most people. Sometimes they skip this part and jump right to the end. It's Romans chapter eight. Listen to what Paul says: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now. And not only the creation but we ourselves." In verse 19 he says, "For the creation waits with eager longing."

The pain we experience is like the pain of an expectant mother. The pain is momentary but there is this realization that what is ahead is going to be awesome, that what we are looking toward ahead of us is going to be amazing,

So I want for us to think about hope in two ways. The first is to talk about hope for the world around us, that the Kingdom of God is growing around us, that it is emerging. And sometimes the Kingdom of God is evident.

A man named Steven Pinker, a secular writer, has written a couple of books lately. The focus is all on progress that humanity is making. He says, "You know, everyone's always griping and groaning, but the truth is that things are getting better. Not in every way. Some ways it's getting worse. But in many, many measurable ways the world is getting better."

Let me just read to you what he said in a recent interview: "I found that there is a pervasive assumption that to be a serious intellectual you have to be in a state of constant indignation and dudgeon about the state of the world, and in particular, Western institutions. Even pointing out obvious facts, life spans are increasing, the developing world is climbing out of poverty, war deaths have gone down. It's met with incomprehension almost. People mistake that work for optimism, rose-tinted glasses, looking on the bright side, it's none of those. It's just looking at facts."

We can look around us and take hold of, claim, believe, the places that we see God at work. It's a matter of whether we'll decide to take hold of those things and say, "Yes! See, the Kingdom of God is growing! It is getting better!" So sometimes that is how we can stay hopeful.

It's to just turn our thinking, our understanding, to just the facts around us, the things that are getting better.

Sometimes the Kingdom of God is still very small. It's just tiny. So he uses this parable of a mustard seed. If you take a look, here is actually a mustard seed. That was one we got in Israel where there was a field full of mustard plants. They grow on a stalk, and inside the stalk there is a hole and you break open the hole and inside is this tiny, little seed.

Now, this is a mustard tree, that's really big. In full disclosure, the mustard seed that you saw is one that grows into a plant that is about six feet tall. But the seed of a mustard tree actually comes in a little fruit and it's about the same size as that mustard seed is. So that fruit lands and the seed comes out and then turns into a tree like that.

Here's the thing. When we see mustard seeds, we see small things that seem insignificant - that you think, "How could that change the world?" As Christians, as people of hope, we see a mustard tree. We don't see a mustard seed. We look at that seed and say, "That's going to be a tree!"

I ran across a poem that spoke to me not long ago. It's called "Small Kindnesses" by Danusha Lameris. I'm going to read it to you:

I've been thinking about the way, when you walk
down a crowded aisle, people pull in their legs
to let you by. Or how strangers still say "bless you"
when someone sneezes, a leftover
from the Bubonic plague. "Don't die," we are saying.
And sometimes, when you spill lemons
from your grocery bag, someone else will help you
pick them up. Mostly, we don't want to harm each other.
We want to be handed our cup of coffee hot,
and to say thank you to the person handing it. To smile
at them and for them to smile back. For the waitress
to call us honey when she sets down the bowl of clam chowder,
and for the driver in the red pick-up truck to let us pass.
We have so little of each other, now. So far
from tribe and fire. Only these brief moments of exchange.
What if they are the true dwelling of the holy, these
fleeting temples we make together when we say, "Here,
have my seat," "Go ahead—you first," "I like your hat."
These small insignificant moments that fill us up our days."

If you think God is only present in the really big stuff, in the really important stuff, then you have pushed God out of 85% of your day. Because most of our day is full of small things. Just the kind word, the word of encouragement to a friend, or a child, the hug you give to someone.

Emily Dickinson has this poem that says, "I dwell in possibility." She says her "occupation is to open up her narrow hands to gather paradise." To "dwell in possibility" to see the mustard tree when we see the seed.

One of the reasons I love - really love - St. Luke's is because we plant seeds. The Amazing Place that we're talking about, or the Christian Community Service Center, or reVision, or the Day School. All of these places that we plant seeds that become something great, way beyond what St. Luke's can do. But it's just a seed that's planted. So our hope is that we look for those small things. And we focus on those small things even when there is something significant, something bigger that's outside of it that may not be so good.

There is a photographic, film technique called a rack focus shot. I've asked them to kind of simulate one for us here. See all that mess that's there in the foreground? Then you could also look at the flower in the background. You could turn the focus from seeing the trash to seeing the flower. One of the ways that we are people of hope is that we look at the flower and that's what we focus on. We see the mustard seed and that's where we spend our energy.

Now sometimes the Kingdom of God is hidden. You don't see it at all and it's at work. You see, the truth is that as followers of Jesus our hope is not because we can see it. Our hope is in Christ. Our hope is in our experience of a God who has chosen to redeem the world. We believe God created the world. Our sin corrupted it, and God sent Jesus to redeem and restore and renew the world he created. And we believe God is at work.

I was sharing with you words from the book of Romans before. Let me read to you what followed, Romans 8:23: "For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen but if we hope for what we do not see we wait for it with patience."

Like the hymn says, "Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness."

So how then do you stay hopeful when you can't see it. Look, this is why our Inside-Out Habits are so important. We pray. We study the Bible. We make friends. We tell our stories. We pray to stay connected to that Christ who we know is at work in the world around us. We study the Bible to see how God has been at work. We make friends and encourage one another.

I hope you come to church with the whole point of being in a place where you are reminded that God is at work, that you're given stories of people saying, "This is what God is doing in my life!" Do you see what God is doing in the world - to just continue to lift us up? And remind us that the Kingdom of God is emerging around us. That's how we stay hopeful.

Now the second way I want for us to talk about hope is not hope for the world but hope for ourselves, for us individually. In Luke 7:21 in the old King James Version it says, "The Kingdom of God is within you." That's probably a mistranslation. It should be "in our midst." But nonetheless the point is that the Kingdom of God is not just growing out there, the Kingdom of God is growing in here. Just like there is evil out there, there is evil in here, and the Kingdom of God is this choking out of the brokenness inside us and the Kingdom continuing to grow.

There's a word we use for that and that is sanctification. That hope for ourselves, that continual belief that we're going to become more and more like Jesus is hope for ourselves, that we're being sanctified.

Now I want to be clear this doesn't say that I'm going to continue to get happier in my life. It doesn't say that I'm going to continue to get more productive in my life, or that I'm going to do better things for other people throughout my life. What it means is that we'll get holier, that we'll become. That we'll always be in the business of becoming more like Jesus.

Carol Dweck has done a bit of work on something called the growth mindset. Her ideas are being used in a school and she has what she calls "The Power of Yet." The word yet. So in the school where her approach is taught, if you get a failing grade on a test, the grade is "not yet." You don't understand this yet. The coach to whom I go to take golf lessons says, "Not yet. Not yet. You still don't have it yet." Not, "You're terrible at golf! You'll never be good at golf!" Which is what my mind is saying. He says, "Not yet."

So this idea of a growth mindset is, "I'm going to continue to move forward. I'm going to continue to try something new. I'm going to continue to grow in my life." But what happens is that at some point in time we just sort of get stuck and we just say, "I'm not going to change anymore. This is who I am and I'm not going to change anymore."

You know, as you get older that hope begins to get replaced by fear, or by sadness.

Dave Peterson retired as the pastor of Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church a while ago. He spoke to our Rooted Leadership Development Program a few years ago. He's a great preacher and teacher. He said that he was filling out a form the other day and it had "age brackets." It was

asking, "Are you 20-30? 30-40? 40-50? 50-60?" Then it said, "Are you 70 or older?" He said, "I realized I'm in the last category now. I'm down there at the bottom. And then I go to buy a mattress and the sales person says, 'This will be the last mattress you ever have to buy!'" And he thought that the sales person thought that was a good thing to say. But for him he did not like to hear that this might be the last mattress he has to buy.

There's a point in your life ... and I have to say I've been watching this with my own mother. That you realize that you are becoming less productive, that you are becoming less independent, and there can be a sadness to that. But isn't it amazing? What if you're at that point where you realize you're so dependent that holiness is actually the realization that you are completely dependent on God? That holiness is not saying, "I can do it!" But that holiness is, "I can't do it without God. I'm completely dependent." That we are continuing to grow.

And then there's a song we sing when students are graduating from high school. We have a service in the Sanctuary for them. We only sing it then because it makes me cry every time I sing it. It's called, "I Was There to Hear Your Borne Cry." The last verse goes, "And when the evening closes in, and you shut your weary eyes, I'll be there as I have always been with just one more surprise."

I think we continue to grow even when we pass, even when we die. That's the business we're in, of always being hopeful for what God is doing within us.

So I heard a parable the other day. David Horton shared it with me. He said that there was a village where there was a terrible drought, and the villagers gathered to pray for rain. And as they came to pray for rain - that is faith. But one fellow brought an umbrella, and that's hope. That's the realization that we are trusting God with our future. That our perspective on the future is that the Kingdom of God is emerging all around us.

And we're going to look at those places that it's emerging. We're going to trust God. We're going to live as hopeful people. We're going to bring an umbrella.

Let's pray together. *Gracious and loving God, we confess that sometimes it's hard for us to be hopeful. We read the newspapers and all around us there are troubling things. People whose lives are struggling. Even in our own lives sometimes we see these giant mountains that are just so big that we don't know how to face them. And yet, God, you tell us that you are at work, that you are at work in our hearts and in our lives and in the world around us. So we trust you. And we lean in, forward into what you have for us tomorrow. When we put our heads on the pillow at*

night, we are full of gratitude for the day that is past and when we think about the next day, we are full of hope. Hope that you will show up in the small things and those small things will continue to grow to be like the mustard tree. Give us that hope, God. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.