

## July 18, 2021 Mark 4: 26-34 The Secret Garden Cathy Davis

**Scripture:** Mark 4:24-36

*Please rise in body or spirit for the reading of the Gospel, which comes from Mark 4:24-36*

<sup>26</sup> Jesus also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. <sup>27</sup> Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. <sup>28</sup> All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. <sup>29</sup> As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

<sup>30</sup> Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? <sup>31</sup> It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. <sup>32</sup> Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”

<sup>33</sup> With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. <sup>34</sup> He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

### **Message:**

In one of the farthest corners of the Roman empire, Jesus tells his disciples and followers, that the Kingdom of God is at hand. And in today’s scripture that Nancy read for us, Jesus tells us something about that Kingdom, he says it is like a man who scatters seeds, then goes to sleep, forgets about them, yet they still grow, first a stalk, then the head, then the full kernel. And when the grain ripens, it’s ready to harvest.

Then he tells us that the kingdom is like a small mustard seed, that grows into a large plant, a plant so big that birds can build nests in the shade of its branches.

Jesus’ use of parables tends to create more questions than give answers.

One description of a parable says that it doesn’t “tell a truth to a person as much as it helps a person discover the truth.”

Pastor Mary Luti wrote a reflection called *No Idea*, here is a portion of it, Luti says “A preacher I know once stopped in the middle of her sermon, head down, silent. After several seconds, she looked up and said softly, “I have no idea what I’m talking about.”

*Luti goes on to say, "She hadn't wandered from her point or lost her place on the page. She been cogent and confident right up to that moment.*

*The moment she was overcome with a searing awareness that she was out of her depth. The moment it struck her that when it comes to the (capital M) Mystery, neither she nor anyone else on the face of the earth has the faintest clue.*

*The moment when she, who'd been nattering away like a person who knows things, was so mortified by her impudence that she couldn't go on.*

*Luti continues...The pastor then finessed the awkward moment with a joke, finished, and sat down. Afterwards, nobody mentioned it. Except one parishioner who told her that when she'd said "No idea..." he'd want to shout "Hooray! The truth at last!"*

So the truth is, we're all out of our depth, none of us have the faintest clue. Not just me, up here, trying to unpack these parables from Jesus, but all of us who are seeking to resolve (capital M) Mystery, to speak of the holy, who want to know the unknowable, and hope to control the uncontrollable.

Today's scripture says that Jesus spoke to them, as much as they could understand and when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

Earlier in this same chapter, following the parable of the sower, the disciples asked Jesus to explain it to them, and he said, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?"

There are a lot of levels of understanding. Like for instance, we all understand that our lives depend upon us breathing, but it's astonishing to me, to learn from someone with knowledge of physiology how breathing affects our nervous system, our metabolism, our sleep, and even the shape of our face.

And, I understand how to put out birdseed and draw flocks of birds to my feeders all day long, but a bird expert can help me attract specific birds based the particular seeds, nuts, fruit, and insects that suit the beaks and diets of those visitors I'm hoping for. And that expert can tell me how to keep the squirrels, skunks and raccoons away from my feeders too.

Some things can be easily learned, and fully understood; given sufficient information, however, the more holy and sacred, the infinite and eternal truths, the Mystery, are ineffable, and we can only hint at and point towards and tell parables about them.

Jesus, as a spiritual master and wisdom teacher, according to the Gospel of Mark, didn't say anything to the disciples without using a parable. Parables don't give information, as much as they give an experience. They don't help us see something new, as much as they help us see in a new way. Parables offer a new perspective. They stretch our minds and hearts and invite us in; they don't give a quick and easy understanding; they say, in effect, *Slow down. Come closer and listen. Let me tell you a secret...*

Jesuit priest Anthony DeMello advised his readers to always carry around a parable. He said, give these stories a chance to work on your subconscious mind and reveal their hidden meaning. He said they will worm their way into your heart and break down barriers to the Divine.

So the Kingdom of God is like a man scattering seeds and going to sleep, and the crops grow. It's like a small seed, growing into a large shrub, a place for birds to perch.

Certainly, at one level of meaning, we can hear these two parables speak to us about qualities we might consider essential in the Kingdom of God. They're soaked in grace - crops grows and produce with so little effort on our part. It's all by the grace of God. Life emerges, growth is given, life supports life. Grace abounds.

And through observing nature, we learn to trust. There is an animating source, a power beyond us, greater than us, sustaining this grand and mysterious universe which is always undergoing transformation. Always changing, growing, maturing. Always productive and generative. Moving through cycles.

Grace, trust, and transformation would be gift enough for us to glean from these parables. But what else can we hear and see in this parable? *What more?* What other perspective might we gain?

Since we are in a garden sermon series this summer, I feel like I've got to talk about the research that indicates nature is not only our teacher but our healer as well. We've long known that trees absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen. We're now learning that time spent in nature, or even watching and listening from our window, has many health benefits.

According to Park Rx America, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to decrease the burden of chronic disease, increase health and happiness, and foster

environmental stewardship, they say, studies show that being out in nature is associated with better cognitive development in children. And that the closer we are to green spaces the less likely we are to suffer from cardiovascular, respiratory, neurological and digestive diseases. Nature helps to decrease high blood pressure and reduces stress, depression and anxiety. Even crime is lower in areas with more trees. It seems we're healthier, happier and more peaceful when connected to nature.

I read a story, some years back, I've been unable to find it again, to tell you the source or even verify it but it stuck with me, and it came to me again as I thought about the different state of mind evoked through nature. The story, as I recall, was about a psychotherapist, who would take on patients that other therapists had been unable to help. People who were trapped in deep mental anguish and distortions. This therapist lived on a patch of wooded land; he had a couple of cottages on it as well. Once he took on a client, they would move into a cottage and were given a journal. His therapy with them begins not with meetings between the therapist and client but with the client journaling daily and delivering the journal to the therapist each evening, for him to read and return for the next day's journaling.

The therapist and client begin to meet for sessions once the client stops writing about all the disturbances, distractions, and obsessions going on in their mind, and begins to write about what they are observing in nature. When the client had moved to journaling about their awareness and connection with the natural world outside them, the next step of therapy would begin.

A garden invites us into the present moment, into stillness and silence, out of the busy, calculative, anxious mind. Calling us beyond just the mind of logic and reason. It speaks the language of the heart and soul. Encouraging us to rest and release and receive. A garden is disarming. **It** can break down barriers to the divine.

In a talk by Irish theologian Peter Rollins he said that "The core subversive message of Christianity is not that we are trying to get into heaven but we are screaming to get God out of heaven, into the earth, into the grime of the everyday of life."

Rollins said while growing up in Ireland, he'd hear stories about the IRA, and how they had a tactic where they would plant an explosive in a building and phone up the authorities and tell them they have 5 minutes to get everyone out. Rollins said he remembers hearing a tale about a man named Seamus, and Seamus dies, and he finds himself in heaven, and he meets Saint Peter. Saint Peter pulls out a big old dusty book, sets it down, opens it up, looks in it for a bit, then looks at Seamus, and he says "Listen

mate, you're not in the book, look you're in the IRA, you're not getting in." Seamus says 'No, no. You misunderstand, I'm not trying to get in, you've got 5 minutes to get out.'

Jesus, living in the first century, in the farther reaches of the Roman empire said the kingdom of God is in your midst.

Jesus' overarching message is that the "kingdom," the "reign," the "realm" of God has come near — near enough that we can reach out and touch it. It's not somewhere else; it's here. It's not later; it's now. That was the primary news that Jesus brought. This is the Good News of the Gospel. It is the news that God is not remote and removed from us in some distant sphere. Instead, God is in our midst, active in our daily lives, offering us gifts, inviting us into the freedom and fullness of life.

For those who have ears to hear and eyes to see.

And through parables, that work on our subconscious and worm their way into our hearts, the Kingdom of God comes as an invitation, a grace, an offering, we're not pressured, there's no force. Through a spiritual power, Jesus reveals this sacred, enchanted, mysterious kingdom hidden in our midst.

"God comes to you disguised as your life" spiritual teacher Paula D'Arcy says. And Franciscan priest Richard Rohr's response is... "that's a disappointment to us." Yes, especially right now when the world doesn't seem to make any sense; it's feels unsafe and scary, it's chaotic, it's tragic, it's messy, it's incoherent.

Us humans, have spent many decades believing that through our logic and reason, reality and God, would be knowable and controllable. In Rohr's book "The Wisdom Pattern: Order, Chaos, Reorder" he says "Physics has discovered that when we get to the smallest points (such as atomic particles) and the biggest points (galaxies and black holes)—it's mystery again! It looks knowable, yet finally it's unknowable. Control eventually gives way to mystery and the letting go of control. Suddenly, we are not in charge. The physicists are becoming mystics, while the clergy are becoming psychologists." And it is great scientist Einstein who said, "The most beautiful and profound experience is the feeling of mystery."

And as Pastor Luti says "when it comes to the Mystery, no one on the face of the earth has the faintest clue."

Though we may be out of our depths in understanding the Mystery, the really Good News is, we are all part of it. Just as the seeds grow, producing kernels and perches and shade, occupying their place in the kingdom of God, at One with the infinite and eternal, whether they understand it or not - we are too. And that's the truth that grounds us. That's our security and our knowing.

God is here – in our midst – disguised as our life - we can relax and tend to the business of scattering seeds in the Kingdom of God.

I leave you with these few lines by poet Mary Oliver:

*Instructions for living a life:*

*Pay attention.*

*Be astonished.*

*Tell about it.*