

Today's second reading comes from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 4, verses 26-34.

Listen for God's word to you this day:

"Jesus also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷ and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸ The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹ But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

³⁰ He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³² 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."

³³ With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴ he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples."

This is the word of God for the people of God... thanks be to God.

The kingdom of God is like...How would you finish that prompt? The kingdom of God is like... Is your answer today the same as it was 5 years ago, or even one year ago?

Does your vision of the kingdom of God involve streets of gold and pearly gates? Does your vision of the kingdom of God involve an embrace? Does your vision of the kingdom of God involve a feeling? Maybe a feeling of love or security? What happens to your

vision if we begin to shift our language to say the kin-dom of God, instead of kingdom of God? Does the idea of kin-dom give us space to broaden our imaginations?

Among many clergy and scholars there is a movement away from the use of the word Kingdom and a move toward using the word kin-dom. As noted by scholar Raj Nadella, ““Kingdom tends to be very exclusive.” For example, people may be excluded because of their race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, or other factors. “The metaphor of kin-dom allows us to envision an inclusive community, built on common humanity and shared values.”

Another way in which kingdom and kin-dom differ, Nadella adds, is that “kingdom sees relationships as a zero-sum game, operating on the assumption that if one community gains something, another community ends up losing. Such a worldview can breed mutual suspicion between different communities and engender violence.”

In contrast, the kin-dom of God is built “not through competition but in mutual cooperation and solidarity,” Nadella says. “People who are part of kin-dom use their resources and privilege to advocate for others who are less privileged.”

The idea of “kin-dom” is supported by Jesus’ life and teachings. Jesus criticized the power structures of his day and broadened the definition of family to extend beyond blood relationships.”¹ Jesus’ use of parables like those we hear today goes directly against the hierarchical structures created by humans, Jesus is bringing a new structure, a new dynamic, and inviting us to get a glimpse of something that is often well

¹ <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2018/2/12/bible-study-ga223-will-explore-kin-dom-versus-king/>

beyond our minds ability to grasp because it's something we've never experienced.

Today he is trying to help us get a picture of what the kin-dom of God is truly about.

How it is that God relates to us and how we in turn are invited to relate to God and one another.

In the first parable we have the person scattering seeds, and the earth producing the harvest. The actions of the sower seem almost neglectful, all we know about them is that they are sleeping in the night and rising in the day, but the parable says nothing about the work or effort put into ensuring a harvest will be brought forth. Does the kin-dom of God rely on our producing of the harvest? Or, are we merely the vessel to ensure others know about the kin-dom of God?

For the past two weeks Lance and I have been driving through some of the most beautiful parts of this country, traveling up through Colorado, to the Tetons and Yellowstone, and returning through Utah and Arizona with stops in Bryce Canyon and Sedona. Like the sower, I can share with you descriptions of beautiful mountains, and red rock canyons, and geyser basins with excitement and marvel, but that itself would not mean you have had those experiences, it may just be the seed that is planted that would invite and encourage you to want to see those places too. Or, I could tell you how it rained one day and that we had to get our tires changed, and the food wasn't really that great at one place, and that itself would not mean you have had those experiences, it may just be the seed that is planted that would discourage your wanting to go to those places. The seeds we sow bring forth a harvest. What are we sowing for the kin-dom of God?

As we drove through Yellowstone and Teton last week there were a number of sites where fires had been allowed to burn after lightning strikes to help restore the land and clear out canopy space to help growth on the ground flourish. At first glance, I thought this is ugly, it doesn't make sense to my human way of thinking that we should work toward sustaining life at all costs, but as we walked through these lands and saw the growth that came from the fires, the new life that resulted from the death of some of the plant life it was a reminder of the work of resurrection, a reminder of the work of God in and through all things, a reminder of how the cycle of life and death is not linear, it is in fact just as it is named, cyclical, with one there is space for another.

The kin-dom of God is a place of growth and resurrection, of life and death, the seeds all have value and nothing is required of them it seems but to be, to grow. It feels contradictory, how are we to plant something but not tend to it and expect it will produce? Doesn't it require my controlling it to help it come to fruition? How are we to ensure the kin-dom of God continues beyond us if we don't have particular rules to follow to know we are doing things right by God? As theologian Don E. Saliers points out about being a follower of Jesus, "To follow this teller of parables is to become alive to all the paradoxes and the tensions of his life and death: goodness appears in human form, and human powers are threatened; yet death leads to life. We struggle to understand while yet standing under the signs of God's offer of life."² We are the sower of the seed, but we cannot and do not control its growth.

² Feasting on the Word, 144.

As an institution, the church has been perfecting rules for generations, we have been striving to control the growth of the seeds we plant by enforcing rules. Some rules tell us how to be part of the group and some rules tell us how we will never be part of the group. The tiny mustard seed becomes the largest bush in the garden, so large it has branches that can hold the birds of the air. Jesus does not tell us the kingdom of God is about establishing rules that define who is in or who is out. There is no description of which birds will be allowed to find rest in the mustard bush. God's love may appear small, like the mustard seed, but it is in fact so vast, so inclusive, that out of seemingly nothing it grows to include all. The kin-dom Jesus is telling us of is abundant, full of grace, and a safe place for us to find rest. Where is that for you? Where is it in the world that you experience grace, safety, abundance? Is it in this space? Is it in the company of friends and family? As the people of God, as the hands and feet of Christ in this world it is our calling to extend that same abundance of grace, and security to others. What we are invited experience, is the very thing we are then invited to sow for others. A safe place to experience God's love, relationships of mutual care, grace to grow as we are meant to, in Christ's love.

Shifting our language from top-down to lateral, shifting from kingdom to kin-dom, allows our vision to shift too. We begin to experience a new way of hearing the parables and hearing Jesus' call to us as his followers with all the paradoxes that following still holds. We are invited to a place of rest by a creator who wants nothing more from us than relationship.

The kin-dom of God is about our intimacy with God, our intimacy with Christ. For all we can try to define and understand about God's nature and the purpose of our lives, what is required of us as faithful people, it all boils down to one thing...The kin-dom of God is an invitation to be, to be ourselves, and trust and rest in the grace of God's love. God wants us to grow, God would not create something that does not have value, God wants to provide for us, to provide an intimate, restful relationship. Like all parables we can peel away the layers and find many great lessons, but for today, may we trust that what God is telling us, what God wants for us more than anything is to know that we are loved, just as we are, that we are here for a purpose, that we are created to grow and thrive, that we are welcomed in, as though we are one of the birds of the air, nestled and resting in God's abundant, even ridiculous embrace. There is nothing, not one single thing that we as the church, or we as individuals, can do to change that. Love and grace abound for each of us, may we rest in that truth and embrace it for life abundant. The Kin-dom of God is all around, in the majesty of mountains and the vastness of the canyons, and in the depth of our beings, and the subtlety of each encounter.