

## **Simple is Hard**

Mark 4:26-34

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

### **Slide: Photo of Lake Superior**

If you had to explain the sight of Lake Superior in comparison to how it looks different than the ocean, to someone who had seen one but not the other, where would you start? If you had to describe the mountains to someone who had only ever experienced the plains, how do you even begin to do that? How do you convey the imagery and the meaning behind Edward Munch's painting *The Scream* and its expressionist detail to a person who had never visited an art museum, what would you even say?

And, if you explain how cold it is in Wisconsin in the winter and also express what snow is like to someone who lives at the Imani School, someone who would never have an inkling of snow and what it might be like, well you get the idea. It may sound simple to explain snow to each other because snow is a simple thing. But, in translation, it's hard to experience something you have only explained to you.

### **Slide: Little sapling in rocks at Lake Superior**

Here we are near the beginning of Mark's Gospel and Jesus chooses to talk about God's Kingdom and what it looks like by speaking in parables. A parable is a simple story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual point and Jesus uses parables according to Mark so that people may better understand his teachings. One thing I find interesting though is that the author of Mark includes very few parables in his Gospel. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke however, include numerous parables. In fact the majority of the parables we know and love come from Matthew and Luke, not from Mark.

So, that Mark includes very few but includes these very simple statements about the mysterious growth of seeds and the mustard seed, we probably ought to pay attention. It is likely Mark wants to tell us

something very important about Jesus' view of God's Kingdom and how we participate in it, and even how we experience personally our own faith.

**Slide: Lavender**

So, in comparison to the other Gospels, how does Jesus talk about and describe God's Kingdom? Here in these short verses, Jesus doesn't use sweeping, grandiose, sophisticated language. He uses a metaphor that is so simple it almost seems plain, maybe even uninteresting. The Kingdom of God is like a seed that is sown and then it grows and is harvested. So, the seed grows, is fed, comes to fruition for a set time, has a life cycle, then it feeds others and brings life. Pretty simple.

And, it seems pretty clear what Jesus is conveying: Our faith, our living a life of faith, and our witness in Christ is something that is planted by God but we don't know where that faith will end up or even along the way how God uses us. We only know that in the mystery of God's benevolence, we grow into the people God calls us to be. That's pretty much what the parable says.

And, in the second little parable, Jesus explains that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which seems so small as to be insignificant, but then it is surprising in what it does. Despite how small the seed is, it still grows to be a great shrub, giving shade and becoming really important to others who relate to it. This shrub, then, not only does more than what is expected, it was a surprise to those around it, giving us the lesson that looks are deceiving in that what seemed small in the end made a great difference. Here we have the simple message that God can use even the weakest in faith and that we should never overlook where God may actually be working in people, in situations, and in the world.

**Slide: Arizona in winter**

To me, standing in the pulpit today, it's rather refreshing for a change to have what seems to be a simple, straightforward story, one that is easy to understand. I don't have to stand here trying to explain the mystery of the Holy Trinity to you today; nor grapple with the difficult question of

why bad things happen to good people. I don't have to deal with the "unforgivable sin" text of last week that Pastor Nate ended up getting stuck with. And, sometimes, when speaking about Jesus, we usually go to the dramatic stories - the calming of the storm, the raising of Lazarus or the miracle of changing water into wine. We can often forget that our Lord was a teacher. We sometimes pass over the down-to-earth Jesus with these agricultural metaphors, yet they are metaphors that tell us some really important but also basic things about who God is and what God's Kingdom is like.

It's simple. The Kingdom of God is simple according to these parables. But, that may just be why it's hard. This planting seed and waiting for it to mysteriously mean something sounds easy but it isn't. Like explaining snow to a person who has never experienced it, how do you live a life in the Kingdom you can't see growing, happening, and knowing the future of. Let's face it. Living a life of faith in the Kingdom of God, as blessed as it is and as simple as it may sound, is difficult to live out. Here's why:

### **Slide: The Bean in Chicago**

First, **Appearances Are Deceiving**. We human beings tend to immediately jump to conclusions based upon what we may see or perceive based upon appearances as to whether it is good, useful, or fruitful. Just take the first reading from 1 Samuel as an example. God clearly states to Samuel that there will be no judging the merit of a new King based upon appearance, age, outward experience or status, but rather what is in the heart. This sounds good to us, but we don't practice regularly. We often choose leaders that are not good for us or ones that may look great on paper or interview well but are not who they say they are. We also tend to not give second chances to people if in their past they have made mistakes; even though their heart has changed, it's hard to see them anew. Furthermore, the talents and attributes of our youth, of varying cultures and races, often we overlook the gifts God gives us by using them. And, well, this is a human thing. We naturally are this way because the human heart struggles often to value God's priorities rather than our own.

Perhaps this is why Jesus teaches so simply, so that we will remind ourselves that the smallest of gifts can have the largest impact.

### **Slide: Washington Island Sunset**

Secondly, **we actually don't like mystery.** In fact, when a mystery is revealed to us, and when we have a full revealing of something great, then we don't mind mystery. But, having no control and no say about whether your child will continue in faith as an adult; or living with a sudden loss that is a mystery and finding any meaning in that at all; or having no clue what God is doing with you in the vocation you have chosen, or what to do in caring for an ailing parent, or how it is that a divorce you never thought would happen is upon you – those mysteries – well, what is God doing to make good out of those things?

On confirmation day, on graduation day, on baptism day and retirement day, those days we love because we have control over those. Those days we celebrate the mystery of God because we feel that mystery has been revealed to us and we choose to stay along the path. But, what God does with us after those days of surety that is the mystery of the Kingdom. How God works in us to make this world more of the Kingdom God calls us to, where do we go, how do we do it? Because when push comes to shove, agriculture we understand. We know how things grow. What to do with it and how to distribute it – that is a mystery.

### **Slide: Wisconsin Map**

Lastly, **we want to trust God, but we often don't.** There is nothing worse than feeling like you are not in control of your own life circumstances. The Kingdom of God often feels random, out of control and ungodly in what people do to each other and what we do to ourselves. And, the ultimate reason why it feels that way and is practiced that way is because we trust our desires and needs more than we trust God. We want things our way. And, we want to control our futures as best we can even though we know down deep that is impossible. And yet, in honesty with ourselves as individuals and as the church God calls us to be, what today in our hearts can we bring God that is difficult in our lives and put trust in

the fact that God's got it and that God knows and claims you as a beloved one no matter what?

So, simple turns out to be hard. These simple parables show a Kingdom that is always a work in progress because we are. And yet, God loves us despite appearances, God does reveal mysteries to us in the patience of time, and God will always keep God's promises even when we don't trust God to do so. Thank God for the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.

### **Slide: Lilac Bush**

The apostle Paul had a hard time living the seeds of the Kingdom and he struggled daily with his faith communities, in chronic illness, and in disappointment that Christ had not yet come back as he continues to promise he will. We are not alone in this, that even Paul doubted. He wrote often of his struggle to trust in God's mystery and the glory that was as of yet to be revealed. And yet, he wrote some simple words to a congregation in Rome that worried about their future as they were persecuted for their faith. He wrote this, which is now often said at funerals:

*"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...For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

It is a relief that we aren't solely responsible for how God's Kingdom comes to be, that in the goodness of time, God enables us to build up faith with patience, knowing that God has a plan. These simple seeds, hard to live out, we pray gives us a way of tending to the Kingdom and to trust that God will be with us through it all, despite how it may appear.

Amen.