

Sermon on Mark 4:26-34
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Dear friends in Christ, grace to you and peace from God, and from our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Why do we have sermons in church?

We have this full liturgy that really moves us through the experience of worship with music and poetry and familiar texts from scripture. There's a way in which the rest of our service invites us into an experience that is both bodily and poetic.

And then we have the sermon. Why?

For every preacher you meet, and, probably, for every person who listens to a sermon on a regular basis, you are likely to get a different answer for why we have this time set apart for a preacher to give their take on things.

The sermon is meant to enlighten. It might be proclaimed in the hope of inviting people into a relationship with Jesus. It's a time for telling God's story. A chance to proclaim good news to a hurting world. It might be a chance to do some teaching about the Bible or theology. The sermon can instruct people in a life of discipleship...At times its all of these.

But the task of the preacher becomes particularly difficult when faced with a text like the one we read today from Mark's Gospel. The text contains little more than a couple of parables. What can you say about a story that was told thousands of years ago? It contains some truth. It's lasted all these years. But we don't always know what parables mean.

And they don't really hold up well when you try to explain them. It's kind of like a joke. As soon as you try to explain it, it loses its power.

Why did Beethoven get rid of all of his chickens?
Because all they ever said was, "Bach, Bach, Bach!"

So that was the joke. Here's the explanation.

[Beethoven](#) is one of the most famous of Europe's classical composers. He was born in Bonn in 1770. [Bach](#) is also a famous classical composer; he was born in Eisenach in 1685, and died about 20 years before Beethoven was born.

If you say, "Bach, Bach, Bach" it sort of sounds like the noise that a chicken makes. This joke is funny because you can imagine a famous classical composer not wanting to hear the name of his competition all day long. Though, as far as I know, there is no indication that Beethoven experienced Bach as his competition. Both were very brilliant, and quite different from one another.

Now, full disclosure. I am not good at jokes. I actually found all of that on a website called explainthejoke.com.

Do we think the joke required explanation? It stood on its own and, in fact, the explanation kind of ruins the joke.

It's the same with a parable.

(PAUSE)

So what are we supposed to do with this one:

"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."

(PAUSE)

I'm going to try to talk about what this might be saying to us without destroying it...because it is a powerful image.

Maybe you're not a farmer or a gardener, and the idea of scattering seed doesn't mean a lot to you intimately. So here are some parables of my own that I'd like to add to the mix.

The Kingdom of God is like a person who is deeply in love with someone she's been dating for the last few months. Not knowing whether or not that love will be returned. She knows she can't keep that love to herself. It's too powerful, too real, and so she says it anyway. "I love you."

The Kingdom of God is like a father whose son has an addiction to opioids. The father does not want that for his son. He wants him to be healthy, happy, and have a hopeful future. He doesn't know how his son will respond, but he loves him too much not to intervene. And so he does. He says, "Son, I love you and I'm worried about you. Please let me help you."

The Kingdom of God is like a 45-year old mother of 3. She's just had surgery and an intensive round of chemotherapy. She's had some testing and she's waiting. Waiting. Waiting for news from her doctor.

Waiting for good news is one of the most excruciating experiences we know as humans. The time between saying I love you and getting the response is a time of longing and a mixture of worry and hope. But, as scripture tells us, not even the Son of Man knows the day or the hour when the Kingdom of God will come about. So, as people who sow seeds for the Kingdom of God, we have little choice but to wait.

It may be an active waiting. A waiting in which we tend the soil and water the seed. In which we nurture our relationships, express love and care for one another, and for ourselves. But at the end of the day, those seeds are their own organisms. We don't know what they will look like or when they will be ripe for harvest.

(PAUSE)

I used to assume when I read this parable that the sower is us. As with any parable of Jesus, there's no appendix out there to explain who the characters are supposed to be. So as much as the examples represent for me that we humans know what it is like to wait...and to wait...and to wait for the seeds we have sown to bear fruit, I also believe that our story of faith tells us that God knows this kind of waiting as well. God knows it intimately.

Imagine what it would feel like to create a world that is good, that is whole and plentiful, but at every turn the people who live in it choose greed and corruption over tending the soil of the fields.

Imagine what it would feel like to give the people of Israel a promise of prosperity and a set of guidelines that will keep them happy, healthy, and harmonious only to watch them throw away the law and their relationships over and over again.

Imagine what it would feel like to give everything, including your very life, so that all people might be restored to you. In one gesture, Jesus shared this message from God with the world: I love you, let me help you, and your life is secure in me.

I really, truly believe that God knows this waiting, just as much and probably more than we do.

But here is something about waiting for the Kingdom to come in fullness that we can learn from God, something we may have trouble with as humans...God has chosen not to know what the coming kingdom will be.

God takes joy in the creation. It is God's good pleasure to give us the Kingdom...and to see what we come up with. God's ignorance of the outcome is what gives us the freedom to be ourselves, to be what we were created to be, creatures who flourish. Who rise with the dawn, lie down with the sunset. And who love God and one another through service and stewardship in between.

God gets to say, "Look at my children. Look at how beautiful they are."

And even though that time between sowing the seed and reaping the harvest can be filled with pain and worry, God knows that in the end, from good we were created and to good we will return.

In faith, we get to share in the hope of God's promise.

Even as we wait for fruit to come, we wait with hope, with yearning, and with an ongoing commitment and desire to keep scattering seeds.

And one more thing about the waiting.

The Kingdom of God is here now. It's here in the words we say. In the actions we take. It's here in our ability to receive love, from God, from our families, and from complete strangers. But our love, our words, and our actions are merely seeds. We don't know what will come from them, or when, or how. But we keep doing them, because what else would we do but rise in the morning, lie down in the evening, and love in between while we await the harvest.

I began with a joke. So, I'll go out with a poem by Robert Frost.

The heart can think of no devotion.

Greater than being shore to the ocean –

Holding the curve of one position.

Counting an endless repetition.

Amen.