

~~“Decently and In Order”~~ Subversive, Invasive, Undomesticated”

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Mark’s Gospel starts with Jesus’ bold declaration that “the kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:14-15). An with that, we are off and running and we would expect Jesus to lay out for his listeners a kind of blueprint, maybe a constitution (at least a nice thick Book of Order), or at bare minimum a tourists’ brochure, you know the kind, with an enlarged, cartoonish map and lots of coupons. After all, such a proclamation necessitates clarification and definitions of what is meant by the kingdom, reign, rule, realm, or empire (the Greek word is *basileia*) of God.

Parables resist definitions—they draw us in and closer but they do not lay out neat plans. Instead, they are enigmatic—mysterious—contemplative—evocative—puzzling. We can think of parables as riddles that beckon us closer—closer to Jesus and the disruptive secret he both suggests and conceals. Parables do not explain things for us. There is a secretive, cryptic element to parables. Like good art, they resist glib readings and easy interpretations. We cannot control a parable. All of this may feel very counterintuitive to us, especially those of us in a denomination that prides itself on setting forth everything “decently and in order,” but for the content matter, the realm of God, parables remind us that we who think we have God in view, may have, yet again, to be renewed into an intensification and alteration of the faith we have received.

Today and over the next few Sundays, we are going to be paying attention to and seeking to nurture the good news that we are renewed and new creations in Christ. The gift of the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost is for renewal and baptism into the person of Jesus who brings the realm of God near. Our renewal and that of our faith community is thus much more connected to the degree to which we allow ourselves to be caught up in the incoming and subversive realm of God and much less about whether we exercise the proper degree of Presbyterian “decently and in order” decorum. After all, the reign of God is nothing short of an event that God brings about, which is comprehensively inclusive, focused on social, political, and economic liberation, eradicating systemic injustice, and bringing the dead back to life.

If you are thinking this doesn’t sound much like the church, you would be right. It is so very important never to equate the church with God’s realm. What we can do is affirm that the church, by the power of the Spirit, can be a sign and provisional manifestation of God’s realm. We can aim for this—follow the Risen Jesus and get to work. But maybe, too, if we ought to be prepared to look for the near and coming Kingdom of God outside the walls of the church. Maybe part of our job is to find instances of the dead being brought back to life, of injustices being righted and liberation being fought for, and to point to them and say, “wow, maybe that is the work of God” or “God’s way is ‘sorta like’ what is going on over

there, maybe God's Spirit wants us to draw us out of the church building to this other things going on."

In our first parable about the growing seed, Jesus seems to want to guard us from easy solutions for what our role is in bringing God's kingdom. Earlier in Mark 4, Jesus tells "The Parable of the Sower"—a teaching that seems to suggest that the type of "ground" determines whether or not seeds of the "the word" will grow. The parable of the growing seeds seems a bit of a cautionary companion designed to guard against prideful and simplistic approaches to our involvement in God's realm. In this parable we are reminded that growth comes not from human effort but organically from the seed itself. The reign of God is sorta like that seed—mysteriously bursting forth of its own accord and timetable regardless of either the work or the slumber of the farmer.

This past Wednesday our Adult Ed class jumped into the first of 4 sessions on "The Holy Spirit You Never Knew." In the first week, we tumbled into the mystery of God's Spirit, through exploring the Hebrew word for it, "ruach" which scholar Jack Levison says "pries open a world of mystery and vitality we rarely see." We were provoked by a definition for God's Spirit offered by Levison as "God's mystical, practical, expansive, unbridled presence in the world, where we least expect it—in every breath we take, in social transformation, in community, in hostile situations, and in serious learning." Friends, if this is who God's Spirit is—the mystical, practical, expansive, unbridled presence in the world where we least expect it, could we expect anything less of the reign of God?

While the farmer may move about with everything "decently and in order"—this is when I plant, now I fertilize and water, now I lay me down to sleep, it is entirely within the nature of God to bring near God's Kingdom when, where, and how we least expect it or try to control it. God's reign has come near enough for us to reach and out and touch it. It's not somewhere else. It's here. It's not later. It's now. But if the reign of God grows on its own, will we know it when we see it? Where should we even begin looking?

In Jesus' day, powerful nations, empires, kingdoms liked to compare themselves to impressive, great cedar trees. Behind our home, when I was growing up was a great long row of giant cedar trees. They were tall and majestic. They were the perfect natural fence between the homes on our side of the street and what was once an open field that later became home with yards backing up to ours. With those large, beautiful trees, we had privacy, a sound barrier, and shade. So I wonder if Jesus' listeners were astounded or humored when they heard him relate the way of God to a mustard seed. There is so much poetic hyperbole packed into this one, short parable. First of all, there are smaller seeds than mustard. Second, a mature mustard plant is hardly a bush much less a shrub and definitely without large branches with room for bird nests. But the biggest laughs must have come from farmers who knew that Jesus was talking about a garden pest, an invasive weed, that no one would sow on purpose. Surely, Jesus, can't be saying that the *basileia* of God is like a mustard weed, which can take over a field and destroy a crop even with its smaller size.

Exaggeration follows absurdity in this final parable about the realm of God. Jesus is being so very subversive with his parable of a giant, invasive weed which was known to upset the ordered, conventional status quo of a field or crop. The reality of the mustard weed, like other weeds that spread swiftly, invisibly and often underground, is that it is more wild than noble, and it is not the chosen plant of kingdoms, farmers or gardeners. So, once again, where do we look for the realm of God, which grows on its own, from a tiny, even infinitesimal start to a wild, widespread, thriving beautiful finish? When we go on the hunt, Jesus wants us to stretch our thinking and our feeling and our eyes beyond their typical limits. Now is when we are called to shed our personal preferences for how we want God to work or in what timing or with what people.

For the struggling, marginalized community that would have been the first to receive Mark's good news, they may have been delighted to hear Jesus' parable correlating the way of God with the almost predatory ability of the mustard weed to crowd out the planned crops of the Romans, even miraculously providing shelter to birds who could also be trusted to gobble up more of those carefully planted seeds. For those on the margins of society and empire, to hear Jesus' parabolic indication that God's reign subverts the dominant system and the status quo of the economic enterprises that prop up some while devastating others, would be entirely good news. For those of us today who sit with tremendous privileges and a fair amount of economic stability and social comfort, it might be altogether right to squirm a bit in our seats. Oh how God's ways are not our ways.

Maybe the near and present realm of God is today sorta like the work and advocacy being undertaken by The Poor People's Campaign, which is a national campaign that is spreading like a weed throughout many states. The Poor People's Campaign, which is now fully endorsed by our Presbytery, is being unconventionally led by folks on the bottom of the economic ladder. They are calling on voters and politicians at every level to account. There is a moral revival, proclaiming that "everybody has a right to live" and the time is now to address poverty and low wages. The Poor People's Campaign is loud. There are marches and protests, chants, posters, megaphones, and 14 bold and radical policy platforms. Without a doubt, the work of the Poor People's Campaign doesn't neatly fit the Presbyterian ways of all things "decently and in order." It is highly subversive. It challenges the status quo on issues racism, poverty and inequality, ecological devastation, and the war economy and militarism. But the New Castle Presbytery has endorsed The Poor People's Campaign as part of our commitment to being a Matthew 25 Presbytery focused on building congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism, and eradicating systemic poverty.

But what about Westminster? What about you? Where are you looking for the inbreaking, near and now realm of God? Because while its timing and power rests in God alone, we who have been baptized into Jesus are called to participate in its coming. So, what are you doing? Who should Westminster be partnering with? What is our role? Are we birds who need to rest not in and among the noble cedars of the American empire but among this lowly, wily, undaunted weed that is nothing less than the saving, joyful upside down Kingdom of God? May it be so! Amen!