

Proper 6 (Year B)

14 June 2009

Saint Mark's, Tampa

✠ I speak to you in the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed is pretty familiar. You've all heard sermons on it. You've probably had preachers bring in mustard seeds to show you how small they are. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record the parable. The lectionary gives us two shots at it – Mark's version, today, and Matthew's version, last July. (Luke's version, for some reason, doesn't make it.)

But the other parable we just heard – the first one – is not so familiar. I've certainly never heard a sermon on it. (Well, except for the one I preached this past Wednesday night.) Until I started preparing to preach on it I didn't even know what it was called. It's the Parable of the Seed Growing Secretly. And the lectionary gives us only one shot at it – because only Mark records it.

Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground."

The Greek word translated 'scatter' is actually 'throw'. In the Parable of the Mustard Seed, the seed is *sown*. The sower is *trying* to get a harvest. (Incidentally, the rabbis forbade the planting of mustard seed. The mustard plant is like kudzu – it grows quickly, takes over everything, and is next-to-impossible to kill. The kingdom of God, apparently, is vigorous, intrusive, and a bit annoying. But that's another sermon.) Anyway, the guy in the Parable of the Mustard Seed is trying to get a harvest; the guy in the Parable of the Seed Growing Secretly is not. Or maybe not. It's hard to tell. He's very casual, very offhand, just sort of flinging the seed without really thinking about it.

The seed gets scattered whether we mean to or not, whether our minds are on it or not. The planting of the seed doesn't depend on our good intentions or heroic efforts. We make a phone call, or dutifully write a thank-you note, or listen to that person pour out the same tale of woe we've heard a zillion times before, and we're not even thinking about the kingdom. But the seed gets thrown anyway.

The kingdom of God, Jesus says, is as if someone would absent-mindedly fling some seed.

Well, of course, once you fling the seed, you do have to tend it, water it, throw some fertilizer on it, keep the weeds and the insects away, and all that, right?

Wrong. “The kingdom of God is as if someone would throw some seed upon 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.”

The guy – who didn’t really mean to sow, as far as we can tell – does nothing at all to make the seed grow. Instead, the earth produces *of itself* – the expression in Greek is *αὐτομάτη*, related to our word ‘automatically’. It’s used in Scripture for things that have no visible cause – “he does not know how” – and points to God’s power lying behind the growth.

The growth of the kingdom of God does not depend on our efforts. At best, we scatter the seed – and then God goes to work, sending sunlight and rain, making the seed sprout and grow, producing first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. We don’t even know how it grows; we may not even notice that it’s growing.

This is good news. Well, it’s bad news if we can’t stand not being in control of things – but do you really want to growth of the kingdom to depend on your efforts? It’s good news that God takes the responsibility for the kingdom.

It’s also good news that the kingdom is growing – we know not how – even when it doesn’t appear to be. It may have been that Mark recorded this parable in part to reassure those who were disheartened because they weren’t seeing the conspicuous success that they had hoped for, in part also, perhaps, to rebuke those who thought that the only time for the manifestation of the kingdom is *now*, and since now is not looking so hot . . .

But Mark says here, as both reassurance and rebuke, that we have to understand that we are caught in between the now and the not yet. The kingdom is now: the

seed has been sown, the growth is happening, God is at work. But the kingdom is not yet: you may not see the growth, and you definitely can't control it, and the abundant harvest is not yet visible, not yet ready for you to go in with your sickle.

And while all this is going on – not seen, not understood, the seed growing secretly – what is our absent-minded sower doing? Since he's not responsible for the growth of the seed – not tending it or fertilizing it or watering it – what is he doing?

“The kingdom of God is as if someone would throw some seed upon the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day.” He sleeps and rises night and day – night and day, not day and night, because we're talking liturgical time here, ritual time, and the Jews reckoned time beginning with sunset. This goes back to the creation story: *“And there was evening, and there was morning, the first day. . . . And there was evening, and there was morning, the second day. . . .”*

He would sleep and rise night and day. I'm going way out on a limb here, and I wouldn't dare do this if there were any New Testament scholars in the congregation, but the invocation of liturgical time, ritual time, creation time, speaks to me of regular and disciplined prayer.

One of the great treasures of Anglicanism, which we talk about far too little, is Morning and Evening Prayer. It's right there in the Prayer Book, meant for everybody – not just the clergy or some super-spiritual elite class, but for everybody. It's a great frame for confessing your sins, reading the Bible, praising God, bringing your needs before him, and interceding for others.

And the steady rhythm of Morning and Evening Prayer, sleeping and rising, night and day, is not related in any obvious way to the growing of the kingdom. It doesn't put money in the church budget or people in the pews, it doesn't get us on the 11 o'clock news for our conspicuous acts of Christian witness – but sleeping and rising, night and day, we are connected to the larger prayer of the Church.

And that discipline, that faithfulness – because, as the Rector likes to say, if you don't pray sometimes, you won't pray always – doesn't depend on how we feel, or how high our level of spiritual energy is – its very monotony, steadiness – sleeping and rising, night and day – enables us to keep going, while the seed grows, we know not how.

And steadily, undramatically, the Daily Office, Morning and Evening Prayer, is like sandpaper that grinds us into some useful shape – so that when the grain is ripe, we will be prepared to go in with the sickle, because the harvest has come.

Harvest always means judgment. But this is a weird sort of harvest. This is not harvest as condemnation, with weeds to be separated from the fruit and burned; this is harvest as fulfillment. The man who absent-mindedly threw the seed on the ground, and did nothing to make it grow, but merely persevered in quiet faithfulness, sleeping and rising night and day, gets the privilege of reaping an abundant harvest. In some parables it's the angels who are the reapers, and in some parables it's God; but here *we* are the ones who get to harvest the produce, even though the growth is God's doing and not ours.

The kingdom of God, Mark emphasizes again and again, comes through the ministry of Jesus. But it's not always evident that that's the case. Church budgets are strained; the people of God are by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed; and it doesn't always look as if the old has passed away and, behold, the new has come. But we walk by faith, not by sight. To those who have been let into the secret comes the assurance that God is at work, the seed is growing, we know not how. In the meantime, we are not called upon to *make* the seed grow – that's God's doing, not ours – only to sleep and rise, night and day, steadily, faithfully, continuing in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and – especially – in the prayers.

It's not always evident when and how the kingdom is coming. The Cross looked like the end, all those years ago. But the seed that was casually thrown into a borrowed tomb brought forth a glorious harvest, and we are the ones who get to enjoy its fruit. He died for all, so that we who live might live no longer for ourselves, but for him who died and was raised for us. To him, to the Father, and to the Holy Spirit, be ascribed, as is most justly due, all might, dominion, majesty, and glory, world without end. Amen.