

Seeds

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13
Psalm 92:1-4, 11-14
2 Corinthians 5:6-10, (11-13), 14-17
Mark 4:26-34

The Gospel scene today picks up halfway through a longer story.

The story begins with Jesus surrounded by a large crowd.

He's talking to them about seeds, first about those seeds that are tossed in all kinds of places, then working his way into the stories we hear today.

He begins by having us all sit down — then he starts messing with our heads.

Yes, it's true!

More than anything, Jesus is intent on messing with our rational, common sense, go-along-to-get-along attitudes that are the biggest barrier between us and the kingdom of God.

So he sits us down, and because there are so many of us, he takes his seat on a boat, as we sit along the shoreline; some of us listening with all our might, others wondering how we got stuck here, others not quite sure, but surely intrigued.

But the text, read literally, doesn't actually say Jesus sits on a boat.

Translated exactly, it says Jesus sits on the water.

And water, as you know, especially large bodies of water, from Genesis, the first book of the Bible, to Revelation, the very last book of the Bible, is a place of chaos and unpredictability and terror.

It's where, in the beginning, God brings order to chaos: it's why the sea, at the end of days, disappears.

It's why I never tried surfing.

The sea is not only unpredictable and chaotic, there's things in there that want to eat you!

So here's Jesus, sitting not on solid ground, but on the very symbol of uncertainty.....and he begins to teach us about this strange reality that he calls the Kingdom of God.

And he teaches in parables, only in parables to the many; but even when he meets privately with us, his disciples, why, even the explanations sound like head scratching parables.

Why?

Why speak in ways that are intentionally confusing?

Wouldn't a nice God give it to us straight?

Wouldn't a respectable God speak clearly to us?

How about a sensible list of rules and regulations, things we can write down and refer to and enforce and be clear about, things that might make us right with God?

Of course, we are making Paul's point, when he says it's not the law that saves us, it's God's overflowing, reckless, undeserved, grace.

As you know, Paul is painfully aware that when it comes to that sensible list of rules and regulations, God already tried that: not just with 10 commandments but with the 613 laws that the Jewish people are given.

The fact is, it just don't go far enough.

Somehow, God needs for us to change; but before any of us can change, we need to get cracked open, and before we can get cracked open, we need a way to see everything in a completely new way.

Last Sunday I listened to a show that featured a woman who didn't know she had parasites that she picked up years earlier from a trip to Guatemala.

She just knew she was getting sicker and sicker.

But what caught my ear is when she spoke of seeing the work of a photographer who has a pretty unusual art form.

He photographs crowds of naked people.

He's gotta have a strong stomach since, speaking for myself, there's a reason we middle aged people wear clothes!

Anyway, this fellow gathers hundreds of people, they strip, and he poses them in various places and positions.

The one that struck the gal being interviewed was a photo of maybe 200 people, all naked, laying curled up side by side on a hilltop.....and they looked for all the world to her like a large mass of larvae.

The mental image, I'll grant you, is pretty gross, but I think Jesus is making the same point with us today, except that instead of telling us a story that we are somehow like larvae, he tells us we are something like seeds.

But whether larvae or seeds, the point is the same.

We are, in this life, only the first beginnings of who and what we are destined to become, and no rule or law or handbook can bend your mind enough to begin to grasp such a bizarre notion — but maybe a parable can.

What Jesus seems to be saying is that we seeds, we larvae if you will, love to try to be in control of as many people, places and things as possible.

We pride ourselves on this, and feel irresponsible if we don't try to control people, places and things, particularly if those people, places and things are the ones nearest and dearest to us.

Maybe that's why the 613 laws didn't work out as intended - they simply fed into our natural desire to hang on: to rules and regulations and other people, rather than coming to see that the way into God is by letting go.

So here's Jesus this morning, sitting on the water, and giving us seemingly ordinary stories that, if heard well, begin to peel away at what we think we know — so that we might discover the hidden knowledge that God always meant for us to swim in.

That peeling away begins with a suggestion.....

"Living with your fingers on the control panels of other peoples' lives not only doesn't get you what you want, it's not doing the object of your attention any good either: in fact, it may end up making many things worse."

That's what Jesus seems to be getting at when he's telling us about seeds.

Once you plant them, if you keep digging them up to see how they're doing, if you try to stay in control of the process of change and growth, all you end up doing is killing the whole shebang.

One of the hardest lessons for us to learn in this life, Jesus seems to be saying, is that growth, especially the growth of those we love the most, usually occurs in ways that we cannot foresee, through obstacles and dangers that terrify us, so that our greatest temptation is to dig up those seeds, to rescue our loved ones, and in the meantime, we only end up killing the growth that they need to endure.

But tied up with this warning is also the most beautiful promise.

The promise is that no matter the appearances, God ensures that all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things shall be well.

No matter what seems to be.

No matter the apparent hopelessness of this situation or that.

But just as seeds that are wildly scattered will grow into grain that feeds thousands, so the challenges we face, and the challenges those dearest to us face, will also be transformed, in God's good time, into something beautiful, and holy, and Real, if not in this life, then surely in the next.

And we can have faith that everything need not get worked out here, in this land of seeds, in the land of larvae.....because death is not the worst thing.

Whether it be the small death of disappointed relationships, illness or humiliation; or the larger death that will someday claim us all; in Jesus, God defeats death, in all of its forms, and somehow, as mysteriously as a seed becomes one with the soil and disappears into the fruit it produces, so in our deaths, we are uniting with God, so that we too, in due time, in God's time, can produce fruit of a taste and a size and an extravagance we could never imagine.

"God's kingdom is like seed thrown on a field by a man who then goes to bed and forgets about it.

The seed sprouts and grows—he has no idea how it happens." Mk 4:26.

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