

Rev. Cathy Zall
The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
July 14, 2024
Scripture: Mark 4:26-32

Like A Seed

[Jesus] also said, "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."

[Jesus] also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

This scripture passage was the lectionary selection a few weeks ago.

It has stayed in my mind since in increasingly deep dialogue with several key influences on my current thinking including—the thought of a 13th century Christian mystic named Meister Eckhart, the wisdom of the Buddha and insights emerging from modern science including quantum physics and deep ecology. When I had the chance to share thoughts with you this morning these verses came immediately to mind.

Parables, of course have a historical meaning and rich insights come from exploring their original context. But parable also, I think, are a living word inviting us to use our imagination and see how the images they contain might speak to us today.

Today I'm sharing some thoughts on how the parable speaks to me personally at this particular moment.

First let's think about the focus of this parable and so many of Jesus' teachings--the kingdom of God. What is the kingdom of God?

I would say that we see the kingdom of God whenever God's way of peace, love and justice power action in the world. When God's will is done. As the Lord's prayer says: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven". The kingdom of God is creation acting in accordance with God's life giving will.

The kingdom of God is in one sense "already" at hand in the here and now—God way of peace, love and justice is within us and around us in every moment. But at the same time, we are all too familiar with the way the kingdom of God is "not yet" as the energies of greed, self-centeredness, hatred, fear and brokenness still shape so much of what happens in the world.

A key theme of Jesus' teach is a call for transformation (metanoia) in order to align— or given the images we are working with today to root-- our lives ever more deeply in God's life giving energy of peace, love and justice. So moving our hearts and minds toward ever greater alignment with this kingdom of God energy is central to the spiritual life. How we think about/understand the nature of the kingdom of God can help us on this path. How does the kingdom of God work? How can I align myself more fully with it?

These are big questions explored in much of Jesus' teaching. Today I'd like to ask—what insights can we gain about the kingdom of God from the two parables we heard.

Share a common image: The kingdom of God is like a seed...

What might it mean to say that God's action in the world is like a seed...

Invite to hold a seed. Look at the seed—what comes to mind? How could this tiny seed show us something about the Kingdom of God?

A few thoughts

1. First if we really think about a seed, one reaction must be awe. How can a plant possibly emerge from this tiny package?

- If we step back—this is Mind blowing
- What a miracle--That a tiny seed becomes a giant sunflower. And the action of a sunflower seed is just one tiny sliver of natural miracles unfolding around us on so many levels. A few others.
 - Every drop of water in the vast ocean includes thousands of bacteria that exchange nutrients with single celled algae and plankton that in turn produce most of the oxygen in the atmosphere.
 - The human body is made up of trillions of cells some human but most an orchestra of non-human microorganisms that all work together to keep us alive.
- Many spiritual traditions and increasing also modern science see this mind blowing unfolding of life as evidence of a profound, mysterious intelligence animating the universe.
 - In an amazing book called the *Web of Meaning: Integrating Science and Traditional Wisdom to Fine Our Place in the Universe*, Jeremy Lent calls this force “animate” intelligence to distinguish it from the conceptual intelligence that plays such a dominate role in our lives today. Conceptual intelligence is manifest more predominately in humans. Conceptual intelligence enables things like symbolic thought, complex planning and the creation of narratives that define a sperate “self”.
 - Animate intelligence is a different type of intelligence manifest in all life from single celled organisms to plants to animals including humans and in the relationships between them.
- The Chinese call this animate intelligence the Tao. Native Americans the great spirit. Jesus pointed to it thorough out his teaching maybe most simply as the love of God.
- Animate intelligence often works in ways we cannot explain rationally but which we can “know” in experience.
- I would also propose, along with many others, that animate intelligence’s character is love and its direction is toward the fullness of life.
- What might pondering animate intelligence say to us about how we could seek to root ourselves more deeply in the kingdom of God?
 - Like all of life, we arise from the goodness of God and while we can be distracted from and even block this animate intelligence at the core of life, this is aways our true nature. Despite all the ways in which we create suffering and harm by ignoring this intelligence of love, I remain convinced that this goodness of God is our truest nature.
 - The path toward living more fully in the Kingdom of God would therefore be one of removing barriers to this flow of love that is our fundamental nature. What we need is not will power and effort to control a flawed nature but discernment and commitment to removing barriers to the expression of our true loving nature. Moving more fully toward the Kingdom of God becomes not something you earn or battle your way into but a fundamental nature you reclaim.

- Meister Eckhart describes this as a process of detachment—letting go of all in us that is not God until a spark of awareness awakens in us. Entering the depths of ourselves we discover God in the soul’s ground and learn to act from that center
- As Rumi put it: your task is not to seek love but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.”
- For me it feels profoundly different to see leaning into the Kingdom of God as a process of allowing our basic goodness to emerge ever more fully vs feeling that we are in a battle against a fallen nature. To think of the search for the kingdom of God as a process of cooperating ever more fully with God’s life within and around us.
- Seeing God’s energy of love as the fundamental nature of creation also powers hope that new things are always possible. Vaclav Havel “hope is a deep orientation of the human soul that can be held at the darkest times. An ability to work for something because it is good not just because it stands a chance to succeed”.

2. **The seed on its own stays as it is—it needs to be planted to grow.**

“It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs”

- The seed alone—even with all its remarkable animate intelligence-- does not lead to growth—but planted in soil, nourished by the rains, warmed by the sun somehow a seed connects with its surroundings, and growth starts
- A remarkable cascade of interconnectedness—starts with the seed and continues to manifest in the plant.
 - As the seed grows the plant develops roots that have the ability to process an enormous amount of information about their surroundings. A small plant has over 15 million root tips sensing the environment able to ascertain whether another root belongs to the same plant, a related plant or an unrelated potential competitor and determine their actions accordingly.
 - The interconnectedness continues—using sunlight to fuel growth. Producing flowers that feed other forms of life. Recycling carbon from the air. Producing seeds for new life. Retuning nutrients to the earth when the plant dies.
 - Modern science is increasingly showing us that this same profound interconnectedness is playing out across all of the created world.

What would it mean if the kingdom of God is like that?

- We would recognize interconnectedness—not our current obsession with individualism—as the doorway into a deeper engagement with the kingdom of God within and around us.
- We would more deeply see that nothing exists on its own making our modern idea of a separate self a (dangerous) illusion.
- Instead, we would embrace ideas like Ubuntu—“I am because you are, you are because I am”. Or what Thich Nhat Hanh calls Interbeing
- Move closer to the Kingdom of God by rooting our lives in connection—to each other, to the natural world, to our deepest nature.

The kingdom of God is like a seed...

To close I'd like to share a seed story I have seen unfold in the area of homelessness.

Fr. Emmett Jarrett of St. Francis house in New London was one of the key people who planted the seed of what is now the Homeless Hospitality Center.

Fr. Emmett had a deep connection to the animate intelligence of love. This made him maddingly impractical but now I see this connection to animate intelligence as one of his greatest gifts.

In 2005 he hears that two people died in the woods because they had no access to shelter space.

Fr Emmett was long on being guided by the animate intelligence of the love of God even when conceptual intelligence would have taken one in a different direction. He therefore responds to the news of these deaths with the seed of an vision—we are not going to let this continue to happen.

The second move relevant to our parable today—Fr. Emmett plants this seed in the soil of community. He reached out, gathered in, facilitated the creation of a community working together to create the soil in which this seed can germinate and grow.

Over all these years FCCOL has been a key partner in building that soil. The church's early support helped get the work started. Over the years this community and individual members of this church have almost miraculously appeared when we hit a roadblock. The work has been hard and we are far from done but the way members of this community have stepped forward to help cultivated the soil over the last twenty years has deepened my sense of a mysterious power of love and possibility at the core of life.

Hardly a day goes by that I do not sense the animate intelligence of love and the power of connection sustaining and guiding us as we continue the work.

We can and do, of course, too often choose to ignore this energy of life and we can see the negative consequences of these choices all around us. It would be easy to get discouraged. But connecting ever more deeply to the energy the intelligence of love and life can empower us to continue seeking to live ever more fully in the Kingdom of God.

This is a collective journey, but it starts with each of our own efforts to cultivate the soil of our own inner life. I'd like to close with a short passage from Dag Hammarskjold who served as an early UN Secretary General (and deeply influenced by the teaching of Meister Eckhart). He kept a personal journal that was later published as *Markings*.

In it he wrote this intention: "To preserve the silence within--amid all the noise. To remain open and quiet, a moist humus in the fertile darkness where the rain falls and the grain ripens--no matter how many tramp across the parade ground in whirling dust under an arid sky."

I pray that we might each connect even more deeply to that place of profound loving silence within. That we might each become ever quieter and more open ready to provide a rich soil for the seeds of love that God will continue scatter.

Amen.

Cathy Zall