

Second Sunday after Pentecost

IT'S A MYSTERY—BUT IS THAT SO BAD?

Mark 4:26-34

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Analysis by Eric W. Evers

26He also said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, 27and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. 28The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. 29But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

30He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? 31It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 32yet 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.”

33With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; 34he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

DIAGNOSIS: A Frightful Mystery

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *How Does It Work?*

Jesus offers two parables in this reading. The first has an

element that resonates with much of the spiritual anxiety that one can find reflected in the many centuries of the Church's life: the mystery of how the kingdom of God "works." Whether it is reformers struggling to articulate the connection between faith and good deeds, "experts" giving out advice on how to make your church attendance skyrocket, or harried working parents trying to do their best to hand faith on to their children, we have a hard time expressing how the things of the kingdom "work." We look for the right techniques, the right programs, the right answers. But have we ever pondered the implications of the fact that such techniques, programs, and answers do not seem to be listed for us in the words of Scripture?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Not Really Explained*

Honestly, Jesus doesn't really explain much here, does he? The seed scatterer doesn't understand how the seed grows, no matter how much he watches. A small seed grows into a shrub to shelter the birds? What is this about? Pull a few commentaries off the shelf and get a bunch of possible answers. Is the quest for a definitive solution possible? "He did not speak to them except in parables," Mark tells us (v. 34a), so it seems that the cryptic nature of Jesus' words is intentional, and not just due to exegetical obtuseness.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Not Included*

And then we read this: "but he explained everything in private to his disciples" (v. 34b). Explained everything? So where do we find it? We don't. It's not explained to us. We seem to be unable to hear, perhaps unable to bear, what Jesus would say plainly (v. 33). We are not of the inner circle. We don't get it, and so we're not given it. Jesus has not chosen to reveal these things to us. The one who came to proclaim the Good News has nothing but riddles for us, and so we are lost in a mystery, rejected and alone with our own wonderings.

PROGNOSIS: An Awesome Mystery

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : A Revealed Answer

But in Christ, we do not have only an enigmatic Teacher. We have a crucified and risen Savior. How does the kingdom of God work? By the Son of God, who appeared to be tiny, of no account, and insignificant, bearing our sins upon the cross. The kingdom works by Jesus making us righteous, free, and alive in return, as his resurrected glory becomes a shelter for sinners, a home for the homeless hearts of this world.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : A Growing Grace

And the kingdom works “of itself,” just like the earth produces the grain in the first parable. We don’t do it. Jesus does it, through the Holy Spirit. We can stop being fixated with getting the right answers, and instead be not just content, but delighted, with the bountiful goodness of our God. Rather than worry about how it works, we can simply enjoy his love. We can receive the sacrament and hear the Word. And we can trust the mystery: Jesus pours himself into us through these very means. How does it work? Wrong question. Why does it work? Right question. And the answer is because God wills to make sinners righteous with the righteousness of Christ. That’s what matters.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : Sent in with Sickles

The wonder and beauty of such a mystery will not leave the receiver unmoved. Just as the farmer “at once goes in with his sickle” (v. 29), we can rush with joy and anticipation into the harvest fields of this world. We can serve and give; worship and pray; teach and bear witness; feed and clothe. We can listen to stories and share The Story. How will these things grow the kingdom? I don’t know. Will they boost your Sunday attendance? Perhaps. These are the same kind of things that the “farmer” can’t explain, but for which he nevertheless rejoices at when he

sees the grain grown without his effort! We don't understand how it all works, but we know that the One who works is faithful and true. Such goodness is a mystery—not to be solved, but to be celebrated!