

Third Sunday after Pentecost, Gospel Year B

Growing Secrets

Mark 4:26-34

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Analysis by Fred Niedner

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

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

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



“When you die as often as we do—given that we’re not so much annuals as dailies—we never tower over the world or control and judge it. Indeed, we don’t even pick whether we bear fruit, nuts, grain, fibers for clothing, or sap to make medicine. It’s not our farm.”

DIAGNOSIS: Mistaking Our Kingdoms for God’s

Mark’s Gospel asserts that Jesus taught in parables to keep people from understanding (4:10-12). Only the few disciples who know “the secret of God’s kingdom” can even get close to understanding, but even they, Mark shows, have great difficulty. The brief parables in this gospel lesson ostensibly describe a bit of what it looks like when God has God’s way. In sum, it works like farming. The farmer plants and harvests but can neither understand nor control the growth of a crop. The parables hold a hint of promise as well. The earth will produce,

though sowers don't know how, and small, seemingly insignificant seeds, grow into useful plants. Any diagnosis of something amiss in the hearts and lives of those listening is at most indirect or implied.

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Smart Farming

Human farmers have everywhere and always worked to circumvent their lack of control over what the earth produces when they sow. In ancient times, they sacrificed to the gods of fertility and agriculture. Some learned to irrigate. Today's smart farmers fertilize, spray, and tinker with the genes of their seeds. We have learned to ply Mother Earth with intoxicants so she hands over her favors, sometimes against her own will. As a metaphor for life in general or for living in a community that would follow Jesus, this picture reveals our frantic quest not only to get whatever we want, but to make or to prove our lives fruitful and worthy of approval, investment, and love. For persons or communities called to sow God's word, we see ourselves exposed as church growth addicts. Whether closeted or out, we all judge ourselves and others by whether our controlling behaviors, innovations, and gimmicks work. "Worship God alone," says the commandment. But listen to our language today: "We worship 45, or 350, or 2,000."

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Tall-Tree Kingdom-Building

We do love the parable about the tiny seed growing into something significant—to a point, anyway. The version we most enjoy recalls how mighty oaks from tiny acorns grow. And our biblically-rooted sensibilities delight in the promise Ezekiel declares in our lectionary's companion lesson to Jesus' parables. We're tempted, even invited, to see ourselves as noble cedars, planted high atop a lofty mountain (maybe even atop The

Mountain). That's our rightful place and destiny. Even if lopped off occasionally, God will replant us, since clearly God means for us to be on top and to rule the world in God's name. All nations and peoples shall bow to us as God's chosen ones. We chosen and enlightened ones shall call the shots when it comes to ethnicity, class, and gender. Hence, we get it about tiny seeds and how they grow. But shrubs? Really! Shrubs????? Not even perennials, but annuals? Forget it. If this is your vision, we've lost faith in you, God. You can have your kingdom. It's for the birds. We'll take the mountain.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Handed Over–Fallen to the Sickle

Having convinced ourselves The Farm belongs to us, we spend our lives in keeping control, no matter the manipulation necessary or the toll it takes, and very often, sometimes despite our sleeping and inattention, things grow. The fields produce bountifully. We have proved ourselves—or so we believe. But even in the best of growing seasons, there comes the day when all is, as Jesus' parable says, "ripe." And Mark's Gospel here uses a form of the verb used everywhere else to mean "handed over, betrayed" (paradidomi). We reach the end. We lose control. Our failures and enemies come back to haunt us. Our bodies and minds betray us. We are cut down. We die. Were we mighty cedars, even in death we could still become sturdy roofbeams in the Great Temple, and generation after generation will look upon us, marvel, and think, "How great thou art!" But alas, shrubs wither away as surely as grass. Why, oh why, God, have you abandoned us?



PROGNOSIS: It's All for the Birds

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Handed Over—With and In Him

“The secret” one needs to know so as to “understand” Jesus’ farming parables sounds very much like a bad joke and a crushing blow: Jesus is God’s son and the anointed one, a root grown up out of dry ground, a shoot from the stump of mighty cedar Jesse, but he’s on the way to betrayal and death. With complicit and encouraging crowds made up of folks just like us, the rulers of this world—with their own kingdoms to control and protect—would cut him down and bury him in the earth. The same fate would—and still will—befall all who take up a cross and follow him. But, as Jesus promises when he finally shares his secret with the world, we find our lives in losing them, by loosening our controlling grip on them. We go with him into the darkness where

every day and every night the seeds in the ground—buried with Christ by baptism into his death—await God’s raising them up again, they know not how.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Embracing our Inner Shrub

When you die as often as we do—given that we’re not so much annuals as dailies—we never tower over the world or control and judge it. Indeed, we don’t even pick whether we bear fruit, nuts, grain, fibers for clothing, or sap to make medicine. It’s not our farm, and part of our own godly secret is that we ourselves are not our own any more than Jesus was. We follow him now as people risen anew morning by morning, trusting that he will lead us where we need to go, stand where we need to stand, and lay down our wealth, strength, bodies, minds, and lives where they’re needed most desperately on any given day. Whether we live or are cut down, we are the Lord’s. We are shrubs. And together, we’re a kind of quietly invasive species, like something that grew up one day, here, there, and everywhere, while the rest of the world slept. God alone knows what good we are.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Living for the Birds

What good are we? Perhaps we live to make seed, but even that isn’t our truest vocation. (God will see to that.) We live for the birds, for whom God is always watching out. God seems to have a thing about the little ones and the least of all creatures. They find shelter amid our strange and crooked branches. That makes us, as a gathered-up community, The Shrub of Life. And truth be told, most of us are also birds, little ones, finding our own precious shelter amid the branches of this strange, crooked tree with its glorious secret.