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Sermon – Mark 4:26-34

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Most of you know I studied astronomy and physics in university; in the beginning I fully intended to continue on in the field to become an astronomer. I grew up marvelling at the night sky and wondering about the mysteries it held. In my university classes I learned how to gain knowledge about stars both in theory and in practice. It seemed routine in our weekly assignments to use the given observational data to derive the mass of a star, its distance from the earth, the class of star and more. But when I had the opportunity to actually observe stars at our department observatory in central Washington, all of the equations fell apart for me. More important than the math or the theory was my need to honour mystery as mystery. How can I really know about something so far away? I was really asking, given who I am, how can I measure my knowledge about God? I think some of the best scientists of history have been people of faith who recognize the element of mystery in their field of study. While I couldn’t reconcile mystery and mathematical equations enough to continue in astronomy, I have a lot of faith that God speaks through the scientific method, and our understanding, while incomplete, deepens our sense of awe in the mystery; just like sitting at the feet of Jesus and learning about the Kingdom of God, deepens one’s experience of it.

Jesus uses these seemingly silly little stories to get across what is impossible to fully understand. Jason Byassee, a professor at Vancouver School of Theology and a friend of mine says, “if you understand it, it’s not God.” So we’re never going for full understanding, but we are hungry for God to come close enough to touch our lives . . . and so Jesus offers parables.

Parable is an interesting word to me because it shares a root with the word parabola. A parabola is the shape; a special kind of curve. When you throw a ball in the air – say you’re at the pool throwing a ball back and forth with a grandchild. The arc you create with the ball as you throw it is a parabola. This shape is special because, like in the case of a parabola shaped satellite dish, all beams of energy that hit the face of the parabola, converge on one point, called the focus. It doesn’t matter where on the face the energy hits, it has to bounce off and converge on the focus. I like to think of Jesus as a parabola, and certainly these parables as parabolas, because they point to God, the focus. This morning’s parables have a special purpose of helping us to understand God’s Kingdom. They are not the Kingdom themselves, but they illuminate God’s Kingdom . . . Jesus taught them to help us first think about the Kingdom, experience the grace of God through the Kingdom, and then hopefully inspire us to engage Kingdom work.

Jesus can sense people’s hearts and knows that not everyone will understand, not everyone cares to understand, and some are not ready. Mark’s Jesus is famous for saying, “those who have ears to hear, listen.” He cannot control who is ready or able, but he can share the message and invest in those whose hearts are ready to embrace the Kingdom and lead people to it. So he teaches in private, he explains the parables and talks about why he uses this method for teaching; he is preparing the disciples, themselves for being out in ministry.

Even though Jesus knew he wasn’t going to reach everyone, he still choses images for the Kingdom of God that came from daily life. The average person in first century Galilee had a sizable garden; not only did they plant and harvest vegetables, but they would have harvested the seeds for the next round of planting. They were invested in the whole cycle for the purpose of survival, as well as in practice of their Jewish faith. Given this level of investment in the growing cycle, imagine how one would hear the parable of the one who scatters seed . . . notice how Jesus doesn’t say “sow” seed, rather “scatter” seed, throwing it wherever, then passively observing the growing process until the joy of harvest day comes! Israelites know farming . . . but even for the most incompetent farmer, God still grows what we plant. God grows what we scatter or sow even when we do not understand. And when it comes to the Kingdom, we do not understand, yet we plant,[[1]](#footnote-1) and rely on God’s grace to bring us to the day of harvest. God’s grace takes time . . . God’s time . . . and patience. I remember agonizing over homework assignments and exams in university; I had one professor in physics who would say, “you can’t learn this stuff after 9pm. Don’t stay up; go to bed and rise in the morning . . . you will be much better off.” I took so much comfort in those words . . . let go, give grace time to work, and have faith that God will carry us through.

(pass out seeds) The Kingdom of God is as large and wide-reaching as God’s grace . . . and as small as a mustard seed. Perhaps not THE smallest of seeds, but pretty small with respect to what it yields. It may be small, but what is contained within a mustard seed? A bird could come along and eat that seed and call it lunch. It could also fall and be crushed or sit in my spice cabinet for 5 years and go stale. Or it could be a road map for growth; potential for life; potential for participation in the larger good. Mustard plants grow quickly, grow wild, and quite large. So large, in fact, that it is said they become a place where birds make a home.

The Kingdom of God is wrapped in grace, starts out small and grows wild and free to serve the needs of the world. The Kingdom does not abide by the laws of humans or Canada, but by the laws of God . . . the same laws that brought the world into being in the first place. Grace was there when that massive star exploded, and grace was there when the cloud of gas and dust that was left over condensed into our solar system, surrounding the star that was perfect for sustaining life. Grace was there when the earth was sown to become the greatest of all habitats for life. Grace was there when the Word of God came to earth to teach us about the mysteries of God, the mysteries of things unseen. How can these mysteries be communicated to us? A little at a time, beginning with seeds that grow.

1. A Companion to Mark, Mike Raschko. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)