

The Power of Storytelling



Rev. Peggy Casteel-Huston
June 13, 2021
Third Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 4:26-34

The Parable of the Growing Seed

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."

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

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."

The Use of Parables

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.

May God bless God's word to our hearing, our understanding and help us in our believing.

Jesus is a storyteller. I, for one, enjoy not only Jesus' stories but all the stories in the bible of which there are many:

- Story of Adam and Eve
- Story of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea
- Story of Balaam's Donkey
- Story of Deborah, female judge
- I recently told you the story of Eldad and Medad
- Jonah and the Whale
- Daniel and the Lion's den
- Images and stories in Revelation and more

I'm a visual learner. If I hear a story, then I remember it better because I can see and experience the story in my mind. As you know many stories touch our hearts just like Yusuf's story today in our children's sermon. How touching to hear his story of being a refugee and making his way to the United States of America.

Jesus told stories because people would remember them, the stories drew from common experiences so that people could relate to them, his stories touch our hearts and we learn something from them (i.e. something about God or even about ourselves).

Storytelling is a powerful medium which is why Jesus used them.

Today we are going to look at some of Jesus' stories from the gospel of Mark and once again I am going to give you context from Mark for these stories.

Remember from last week I told you that Mark was likely writing during the first Jewish-Roman war. It was a tough time to be writing about the inclusion of Gentiles into the reign of God. I told you that Mark is letting us know that Jesus was not only a boundary breaker, but he spoke and did things that were totally against what the religious authorities of his day thought that they knew about God.

Here is a bit more helpful information. Mark chapter 4 has Jesus doing his teaching by the sea and so this information comes from a book by Rev. Dr. Brian Blount, President of Union Seminary and Professor of New Testament. Blount writes that “when the gospel writer Mark put Jesus doing things by the sea, he believes that the sea is a metaphor for the demonic and apocalyptic chaos that confronts Jesus, terrorizes his disciples and threatens the future of the gospel”. Blount sees this used best in Mark chapter 4. In Mark, Blount writes, “the sea is not the locus for romantic cruises on aquamarine waters, but for demon-filled waters that threaten to leave widows behind whenever their loved ones set sail in pursuit of their livelihood. The sea is more than a geographical notation; it is where discipleship is challenged, where boundaries are impassable, where life always hangs in the balance and where evil lurks as a formidable foe.” Preaching in Two Voices

This makes perfect sense to me. We remember from last weeks’ sermon that Jesus was gathering and calling people ‘family’ with only one restriction that had nothing to do with purity, holiness, or ethnicity but a willingness to do the will of God. It makes sense that the sea absolutely could be a metaphor for moving beyond safe harbors of Pharisaic teachings into pagan lands where the lives of these Jewish followers are thrown into ethnic and religious chaos.

Within this backdrop, the disciple and gospel writer Mark continued to call people to be followers of Jesus during his writing. Mark obviously knew of the high cost of discipleship and the extraordinary blessing of following Jesus which would require much faith to follow. So Mark recalls these stories (parables) of Jesus and writes them.

As we return to our scripture from Mark chapter 4, we all remember this story from the first part of Mark where he writes about a Sower who sows seed but it falls on very different types of ground: some on the path, some on rocky or thorny ground and some on good soil. I have heard this scripture over and over compared to the condition of **my** heart as to whether my heart (and head) was in a place to receive the word of God in such a way that the word of God would take root and bear fruit for the reign of God in me. But what I appreciate more than anything is another way of seeing these stories.

Sharon Dowd in her book, Reading Mark, writes that in her reading what she sees is Jesus warning all the hearers of Mark's gospel that as the reign of God continues to take root it will provoke opposition, persecution and seduction from the forces of evil and she believes that it is the nature of the reign of God to provoke opposition as it cannot do otherwise. (pg 50)

Every story that Mark writes that Jesus told add something about the coming reign of God. Mark wants these potential followers of Jesus to know that while following Christ will bring peace, security in ones soul and joy it can be dangerous as there are people who will want what they want, they won't want to see the gospel of Jesus Christ as being inclusive and for everyone, they like the

status quo. So as followers will we encounter thorns, rock and dry places – absolutely!

The story of how the seed grows without people really knowing from verse 26 is similar to Isaiah's passage that Richard read for us this morning. Both scriptures seem to give the same idea that the future of God's reign depends less on the efforts of humanity and more on God to bring it about. Stories assure us of God's faithfulness.

In our story of the mustard seed, it provides yet another look into the reign of God. It makes me think of Jonah where God appoints a vine to grow and provide shelter for Jonah as he waits to see what will happen to the city of Nineveh, but in this case, this seed will grow a place into a place where the birds find shelter but is a metaphor for where all can find shelter, like you and me.

What I hear in these stories is not to worry if it appears that God is not gaining ground, God will bring about God's reign and God is accomplishing God's will in every moment of every day – just look at what God can do with a mustard seed. What I hear is a reminder that doing the right thing, standing for the gospel of Jesus, following the will of God will put us at odds with those (and we can call them outsiders if you will) who are not in the same place as we are.

At the end of the chapter, we will see that in Mark's gospel the sea is still roaring, telling us that those who would seek to do great harm, those who would find ways to derail goodness will always be around. It is as if Mark is saying that it is okay to be frightened as long as we remember that God is more powerful than any unruly gang or force. The stories of Jesus are meant to

give us confidence that God is at work bringing about God's reign even when it is difficult to see how this could be happening. Clearly Jesus is saying that those who are willing to listen, to open their ears, those are the ones to whom great understanding will be given as we are that good soil in which goodness grows.

Stories have great power. If nothing else, they cause us to pause and think, to consider and hopefully to really listen. As we listen we gain confidence that God truly is at work in every situation and in every moment of every day, our faith strengthens and gives us the courage to speak to keep on keeping on for the reign of God and God's truths.

Let us pray: Creator God, Lover of all humanity, help us to be those people who open our hearts and our minds to be reminded of your truths. Jesus never promised that standing with him and for your reign and your truths that this would be easy. There are many, even today that we see who, like the Pharisees and scribes of Jesus' day, hold beliefs and ideas that would lead them to fight and persecute others. There continue to be those who don't want to open their hearts and minds or even to consider that there might be more to You than what they have been told or taught. Help each one of us to keep our hearts open and grant us the courage to speak truth even when it may be very unpopular to do so. Amen