

Seedy - November 9, 2014  
By Wayne J. Schneider - Soli Deo Gloria

Seedy  
St. Mark 4 :26-34

I have a riddle for you, and by the way, only 17% of Stanford college graduates figured out this riddle, but 80% of kindergarteners knew the answer. Ready?

"What is stronger than God, more evil than the devil, poor people have it, rich people don't need it, and if you eat it, you'll die?"

Do you have the answer? The answer is:

"Nothing."

Nothing is stronger than God. Nothing is more evil than the devil. Poor people have it and rich people don't need it. And if you eat nothing, you'll die!"

Today's Gospel lesson brings us to some thought-provoking challenges. And these tests come to both listeners and preachers. One problem is that it is difficult see these Bible stories in a new way because we have heard them so often. We recognize them as old friends.

Another challenge is that these stories are in the form of parables. Jesus often used them as vehicles for teaching and that he often used familiar items such as coins, sheep, flowers, and seeds. There is always the risk that we see these parables as object lessons, and not see the deeper treasure of meaning. We might just see the object and not understand the way Jesus is using it.

Most of us no longer live in an agrarian society and it is helpful to recall that Jesus spoke these parables two centuries ago. Those who worked the soil knew the need for warmth, water, and weeding, but the actual process of a crop would appear to be mysterious.

Today's parable in verses 26-29 explains the unscientific process and its outcome. Earth reproduces itself by some secretive way. You plant the seed. The plant grows. And finally the end product and its harvest time!

The same miraculous experience is also connected the other parable in our text, the mustard seed. This seed is tiny but it produces a bush large enough for birds to nest in.

One way to interpret these well-known and beloved allegories is to see them as stories of the Kingdom of God and the way it develops and transforms us. This conversion helps us to be spiritually fruitful. It is graceful: God does it all. These 'seedy' images show us how God works. If we look at these parables we see that the harvest is larger than the seed. Living in God means a larger harvest than we could make on our own.

Another aspect to these parables, indicates that this growth comes in God's timing. Now, I know you are not like me, impatient, ready to act just for the sake of acting! This was an important understanding for Jesus' time because the nation of Israel was caught in the social, political, and economic web of a foreign power, the Roman Empire.

Verse 28 reminds us that just as "The earth produces crops all by itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full head of grain," so the coming of God's kingdom in its fullness is not only God's work but it is incomplete. Change is coming. Those who oppress will be brought to justice and the oppressed will be set free. Like the planted seed emerging, active and unseen, God is working bringing in the Kingdom.

If we look at verses 30-32 again, we might find a meaning different from the overly familiar big things come from small beginnings.

Bible scholars like Professor Lose encourage us to go beyond considering parables as tame teaching stories. In a blog (June 17, 2012) on this text, Lose says, "that parables are meant to overturn, to deconstruct, to cause frustration, and for those who stay with them, the parables bring transformation."

Another challenge to our domestication of these parables comes from Sharon H. Ringe. She reminds us that given its medicinal and cooking properties, the mustard bush would never been intentionally planted. It was a garden pest. It grows so easily on its own, from a small seed to a bush several feet high. The birds that nest there continue the propagation of the mustard by the spreading the seeds to other farms that do not want them either.

The extreme image for God's kingdom might be interpreted as a reminder that the Roman Empire's power will be undermined by a different kingdom's power.

This new kingdom's progress will happen by the earsplitting and uncontrollable power of God's Holy Spirit, and it will be unstoppable.

Looking at the mustard seed and bush this way drives us away from just the parochial interpretation of something great may come from something small, to an understanding that Jesus' teaching on God's kingdom is never under human control. The seeds planted.

Growth will happen but it will do so in ways that will shock and astonish. This growth will not be by human plans and systems, or by those who attempt to corral this power or to keep it at a distance.

This is a wonder, grace-filled word of hope for those who are bound and held back. This is also a challenge for those of us who have independence, health, and assets, or not, to be members in the kingdom of God, as agents of change and transformation.

These two teaching parables are not about agricultural growth, not of bushes or foliage, but of personal spiritual growth as we live in relationship to God and each other. As God's kingdom increases with us, we are free to be all God wants us to be.

The winner of the Nobel Prize for Peace, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, began her orphanage with such a hope. She told her superiors, "I have three pennies and a dream from God to build an orphanage. "

A dream and three pennies represented resources as small as a mustard seed.

"Mother Teresa," her superiors said, "you cannot build an orphanage with three pennies ... with three pennies you can't do anything."

"I know," she said, smiling, "but with God and three pennies I can do anything. n

After hearing how she had the vision to start her orphanage, I think that maybe Mother Teresa might have understood these parables better than most of us.

As the kingdom of God grows with us, we are freed to be all that God wants us to be. Alleluia. Amen.