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May I Be Me? St. Mark 4:26-34

When it comes to sharing truth, however, God is no respecter of persons. God gives out truth and light freely to everyone regardless of their I.Q. It just depends on whether you're listening or not.

There are some passages of Holy Scripture that nearly preach themselves. Others, such as our Gospel lesson today, that present a thought-provoking challenge for preachers and congregation alike. One obstacle is the probability that we have heard these passages countless times. The aphorism, "*Familiarity breeds contempt,*" reminds us that it is hard to imagine a parable or story with freshness, because they are familiar.

Another challenge is their nature itself: they are parables, the teaching methodology of choice for Jesus. Recall his use of such mundane objects as coins, flowers, or sheep, to make a spiritual point. The pitfall we may encounter is thinking these "teaching stories" are short, snappy, stimulating object lessons; and miss the deeper abundance of their meaning and value. We picture the object but miss how Jesus utilizes it.

Added to these difficulties is when Jesus taught these parables: 2000 years ago, in an era and area without much science. Farmers would understand how to plant crops, but not how they grow; they would see the growing of their crops as a mystery.

St. Mark, in verses 26-29, writes a clear, elementary description of this well-known process and its expectations. In a mystifying manner, the earth produces itself. Plant a seed and the whole process begins and then ends in a harvest.

This sense of mystery may be seen in our second well-known parable, the story of the mustard seed. This miniscule seed, when planted and cared for, produces a shrub large enough to house Bird nests.

A typical interpretation is that these two parables are stories regarding the Kingdom of God, and how it grows within us as we are changed, made new, in God's initiative and timing. Both parables make the point that in God's action, grace flourishes. The harvest is larger than the seed. God's way always produces more than we can do ourselves.

In verses 30-34, the point is that in God's timing growth happens. This is the point where Wayne often struggles: *impatience*. We sometimes want to act for action's sake. This is applicable to Jesus' time because to exist involved political, economic and social repression by the empire of Rome. Change according to God's calendar, is also a warning to these first century believers, who desired to begin a revolt against Rome through armed confrontation.

Through these parabolic stories, Jesus assures his hearers (v. 28) that the coming of the rule of God is a work-in-process, that is God's doing, not ours. The dictators will be struck down and the oppressed will gain freedom. As the seed develops, unseen and active, so God is working to bring in God's Kingdom. This growth is visible only for those who have eyes to see. Believers are partners in the harvest, experiencing the blessing, but remembering the gift and initiative is from God.

With that background we can reassess verses 30-32, and begin to see they may have a meaning quite different than we have thought. Instead of viewing these parables as tame, cutesy stories, we can understand their meaning to be about over-turning, deconstructing, frustration-causing action. But, for those who stay with these parables, they will discover revolution.

Dr. Sharon Ringe challenges our domestication of these parables, by reminding us that even though mustard is an herb and aids in the preservation of

food, the mustard bush is a garden pest. Farmers would never knowingly plant mustard, because it is a prolific plant that grows to a height of several feet. And, because birds live in these bushes, the seed is spread further than the farmer's field.

A more radical image for the Reign of God, is that the military might of the Roman Empire can be toppled by the power of a vastly different kind of kingdom. The growth of this kingdom will be powered by the uncontrollable Holy Spirit.

Viewing the mustard seed and bush in *this way*, gives us a enormously different prospective on the parable's meaning. Beyond saying that a small thing may produce a bigger object, this story declares that the Kingdom of God, as proclaimed by Jesus, is never under the control of humanity's power.

The Seed has been planted, the growth will come, and the Kingdom will arrive in ways that will startle and surprise. This Kingdom is not dependent on human plans or programs, nor is it constrained by those who would build fences to either contain it, or to keep it at a distance.

This is an astonishingly hopeful story for those who are in dire straights, or who are restrained by the stress and worry of today. The Kingdom provides freedom, healing, and the resources to be joyful participants in the Body of Christ. Kingdom members become agents of change, for themselves and for others.

These parables of growth, these stories of '*how to live in a growing relationship with God and each other,*' show the way to become all that God desires us to be. Alleluia. Amen.

Magnificat anima mea Dominum. (My soul doth magnify the Lord)