Sermon on Mark 4:26-34 and 2 Corinthians 5:6-17
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When I was in college, I had a group of girlfriends. One of the young women in this group was named Mary. Mary had an unfortunate habit of turning all conversations to herself. If someone started to talk, Mary could always find a way to make it be about her. No matter how far removed the topic, she could always steer it back to herself. Want to talk about a man walking on the moon. Somehow it was about Mary. Want to talk about your latest vacation to the beach? That was about Mary too, even though she was visiting her grandma at the time. Want to discuss quantum physics or your latest boyfriend issue? You got it. It's about Mary. It became so annoying that my friends and I labeled it "BTM", Back to Mary. Then, we began to make jokes about it. In the middle of a conversation, one of us would say, "Okay, so anyway, back to Mary." Then, it morphed into "Okay, so anyway, back to me...Back to Me."

And really, if I'm honest, that's how I would like everyone to live. So, anyway, back to Susan. For let's be real here, it is all about me, isn't it? And as soon as everyone realizes that it is all about me and starts living that way, the better.

The reading of these parables is no different. BTM…who am I supposed to be in the parable? Am I the gardener? Am I the seed? What am I supposed to do to make the seed grow? Because it's all about me. It's about who I am and what I do and what I can make happen.

Maybe that's why these parables from Jesus make no sense. They don't fit into my logical Back to Me world. After scattering the seed, what happens? The person who scatters it goes to sleep. What? That's not how it works. Everyone knows that after scattering the seed, someone has to tend the garden, watering, weeding, thinning out, fertilizing, fussing over, nurturing. And the gardener goes to sleep? Well, then, what am I supposed to do, just sit around and wait?

The very simple and short answer according to Jesus in this passage is, “Yes”. In this parable, Jesus tells us that it’s not about us. It’s about God and God’s mysterious, wonderful, free grace-filled-love that brings about the harvest in our lives.

We talk a lot around here about bringing about the kingdom of God. We talk of what we are to do to make that happen. We are to be a part of it, in thought, word, and deed. And, let’s remind ourselves that there are many, many of Jesus’ parables that tell us just that. We are to use our “talents” to bring about more “talents”. We are to choose the places where we plant the seeds of faith well…not on rocky ground or within a thorn patch. We are to make sure we have enough oil in our lamps so they don’t go out in the end. We are to respond to Jesus’ invitation to the banquet instead of turning back to our everyday chores. There are lots and lots of those parables.

But, not this strange little parable. This one tells us that it isn’t about us. Our frenetic busy-ness, our strivings, our worryings, our plannings, our nurturings are not going to bring about the kingdom of God. Instead, God is. God’s grace, working as mysteriously as a seed growing into a plant, a bush, or even a tree, is at work in our lives to bring about God’s Way.

Wendy Farley, a professor at Emory University, says of this parable, “Intimacy with Christ grows in us as certainly and as effortlessly as seeds grow. We have so little to do with Christ’s nearness to us that we can just go to sleep…Our difficulty [with this passage] arises in confusing the way of the kingdom with our ordinary way of doing things. Jesus is calling us to a very different way of being with ourselves, with one another, with the divine, by asking us to recognize that spiritual growth and intimacy with God arises as naturally as seeds growing. The harvest will come without us having to work for it, because God adores us and it is this love that is the power of growth. It is this love that transforms the tiniest and most impotent-looking seed into a lush bush that gives rest and shade to the singing birds, just as it transforms our tiny, distorted awareness of God into a magnificent luminosity in which we ourselves and all the creatures we meet can rest” (*Feasting on the Word*, 142).

What great good news that is! It's not all about me or you or us! It's about God and God's grace at work in the world. So, when the PRAYS team works on someone's house and finishes up only to see an endless number of other folks living in horrific conditions, the despair doesn't have to take over. Because God's kingdom is coming about in a way we can't understand. Or when more children come through the poverty that surrounds Good News Partners, we don't have to throw our hands into the air and give up. Because the seed of God's kingdom is growing. When we hear of a security guard shot and killed at a museum or of a child playing baseball hit in the head with a stray bullet, we don't have to sink into anguish because even in the midst of such violence, God is growing God's seeds. When in our own lives, it seems as though our faith hasn't reached much past mustard seed size, we don't have to fall into despondency for God is bringing about God's kingdom in us and in the world.

No, we don't understand it. And the more we try to figure it out, the less we will understand. I remember when I was in school, in physics, I studied electrons, protons, and neutrons. Near the end of my education, we had started talking about quarks. But now, scientists are well past all that into gluons, photons, neutrinos, and muons. And those don't even include the exotic particles…whatever they are. And more and more, what I hear many scientists saying is the more they know…the more they discover…the less they are certain about. Mystery. Wonder. We can't figure it out. And yet, we know that life is. Life occurs and continues to occur. And we continue to live in it.

We can't figure it out or control it or make it happen. That's what Jesus seems to be telling us in this parable. The Kingdom of God will be because God is and because God puts the potential in each seed. The smallest, scraggliest, nothing seed will grow into a big, shade giving plant, not because of the seed, but because of God.

2 Corinthians says it this way: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God…that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to God's self" (2 Corinthians 5:17-19, NRSV). We are a new

creation, not because of who we are or what we can do or what we can make happen, but because of who God is, full of grace, mercy, and love.

So may we live as God's new creation. Amen.