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All Saints Episcopal Church

Do you know the difference between a fable and a parable? Well, a fable is a clever story that is meant to offer some insight into and instruction about life – think of Aesop’s Fables. Fables are useful when you want to give someone good advice or teach a moral or practical lesson. Remember the story of “The Tortoise and the Hare” and its lesson: slow and steady wins the race? Or how about “The Boy who Cried Wolf” – honesty is the best policy?

A parable, on the other hand, is intended to be disruptive; to interrupt what you thought you knew – to confront you with a surprising and often uncomfortable truth. That truth might be hard to hear, hard to understand, or hard to believe. Perhaps Emily Dickinson thought about parables when she wrote her poem called “*Tell all the truth but tell it slant”*. In other words, if it is going to be a difficult truth, approach it from an angle to make it a little easier to swallow.

Jesus used parables to describe the Kingdom of God because the reality of the Kingdom was unexpected, and his listeners would have had a hard time taking it all in at once. Eugene Peterson, the translator of The Message version of the Bible, has said that parables are like narrative time bombs. You hear a parable – *tick* – you wonder about it –*tick* – you think maybe you’ve figured it out – *tick* – and then, as you walk away, or sleep on it – *tick* – all of a sudden the truth Jesus meant to convey strikes home and – *BOOM!* – you are almost overwhelmed with its implications or almost blinded by the AHA! of its vision!

In today’s passage from Mark, Jesus expresses two truths in the parables he tells. But don’t expect to hear them from me. The truths are what is truth to you, and to you, and to you, and to each of us here. I can mention a few things that they *might* be about, but you will have your own time bombs to carry with you!

The first parable about the sower and the seed, *might* be about the wonder of faith – the wonder of casting seeds onto the ground and not really knowing if or when or how or even why they sprout and grow. Remember in an early Sunday School class where we each were given a bean of some sort, and a paper towel which we put in some water, and wrung it out a little bit, and then put the bean carefully into the wet paper towel and then put all of that carefully into a little Dixie Cup? Then we took it home after church and put it in the kitchen windowsill, and promptly forgot about it. And we’d sleep and get up and sleep and get up, and then one day, we’d look in the windowsill, and there – there was a tiny green shoot sticking out of the top of the cup! Wow! How did that happen? What made it grow?

*Boom!*

But…the parable *might* be about the reality that we are not in control of bringing in the kingdom; that we are not in control over whether we or others believe or don’t believe. That’s not necessarily a very comfortable idea, because it points out our vulnerability. God’s kingdom comes in on its own; we don’t control how or when it comes, we don’t influence how it works or who gets to be in it. It is something that comes from the outside and grabs hold of you, whether you want it to or not! In that way, faith is more like falling in love than like making a decision. *Boom!*

The second parable contains, perhaps, an even more difficult truth. It *might* be about how God can grow grand things out of small ones, although that sounds more like a fable than a parable. But *maybe,* it’s about how the kingdom of God tends to make its way into our lives, taking them over, as it were. The great shrub that comes from the tiny mustard seed, after all, is not a magnificent cedar as described in Ezekiel, or a grand old oak tree in Washington Square. It is a weed that has, in fact, been described as the Middle Eastern equivalent of kudzu, spreading rapidly and getting out of hand, taking over whatever ground it infests!

Now, please don’t worry. I’m not trying to make this sound like some kind of brain-washing cult that takes away our personalities! But it IS a new reality that invades, overturns and eventually overcomes the old reality of our lives.

The mustard plant is big, but it doesn’t get very tall, and since it is a weed, it has humble characteristics. So it *might* be that it describes the Kingdom in its humility – like a King who enters a city, humble and riding on a donkey; who comes not to be served but to serve; who stoops to wash others’ feet; who kneels by a wounded stranger on the side of the road. *Boom!*

And it *might* be that the kingdom is big enough, like the shrub, for birds of every kind to find a home: sweet songbirds, birds with jewel-like plumage, annoying birds that dive and peck at smaller birds, birds with shrill calls and dull colors; Jew and Gentile, male and female, black and white, gay and straight, rich and poor, introvert and extrovert; people from east and west, north and south, left and right, uptown and downtown. We are not in control over which birds nest there; birds of **every** feather can flock together because this shrub, this Kingdom, this Gospel, this God, is big enough for all of us to sit down at the Table together. *Boom!*

So now, my work is done. Now it’s up to you – to think about the parables and to discern what truth speaks to you. There are no wrong answers. Maybe you resonate with the truths of the wonder of faith and that great things can come from insignificant ones.

*Maybe* the idea that the kingdom is out of our control is what is truth for you. If you are not satisfied with the way things are – if you can imagine something more than the status quo of fear and scarcity and limited justice and all the other things we are offered in this world, then maybe the idea that the kingdom of God is infiltrating the kingdom of the world offers a word of hope – a hope that doesn’t just cheer you up, but moves you to action. Can you find the hope? Can you share it?

Truth: Hope is the only thing more powerful than fear. Give it a chance. *Boom!*