

Provoked by the Parables

The Mustard Seed

January 30, 2011

**Psalm 15 & Matthew 13:31-32
(Hymns – 18, 344, 358, 373)**

Jesus told parables to answer questions.

There is always a context for a parable,
a situation into which the parable is spoken.

Knowing more about that situation
is crucial to understanding the intent of the parable.
What's the question the parable is addressing?
What quandry or doubt is Jesus trying to answer?

And, of course, for the parables,
there are at least three contexts that must be considered.
The first is the original context into which Jesus spoke the parable.
The second is the gospel writers context which influences
where he put the parable in his account of the stories of Jesus.
And the third is our context,
in which hear and interpret and act on the message of the parable.

So, not only do we consider what Jesus said,
but also what the gospel writer was suggesting by his placement of the parable
and what quadries and doubts we may bring to *our* reading of the parable.

All of this makes for lively considerations and dialogue
as we are guided by the Holy Spirit
into a richer and deeper understanding of what it means
to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ.

Let me digress for just a couple of moments here
and say a few words about the Holy Spirit.

In the Reformed tradition of understanding the Christian faith,
the inner witness of the Holy Spirit
is a crucial part of how God works
to draw us into participation in kingdom of God
inaugurated in Jesus Christ.

That's the central focus for the parables –
the nature of the kingdom of God that is seen most clearly in Jesus Christ.

For many years now, I've referred to the Spirit as the *Sustainer* when I have used the trinitarian formula in prayers and preaching – Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. The emphasis here is on the way God continues to nourish us to flourish with every breath we take.

Leah Yoo reminded me of an older, more traditional way of referring to the Spirit in the paper she wrote on her understanding of ministry for VST. She spoke of the Spirit as the *Sanctifier*, the power that constantly reshapes us into the image of God in Jesus Christ, the influence that draws us into the community of the new humanity seen first in the flesh in Jesus Christ.

As we have been provoked by the parables over these past few weeks, yet another way of reminding ourselves of the work of the Spirit is to use the phrase *Kingdom Builder*.

The Spirit is God's presence and power in the world continuing the work and witness of Jesus Christ to the way God invited us to live in companionship and friendship with the community of God that is the Holy Trinity.

So, when we are living in the power of the Spirit, when we are a Spirited people enjoying the gifts of God's grace and being loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, humble, and self-controlled, then we are building the kingdom Jesus teaches about in the parables.

I guess that wasn't really a digression at all. This stuff about the work of the Holy Spirit is central to our understanding of God's influence in our lives and how those lives are being shaped to build God's kingdom.

But let's get back to the question the parable of the mustard seed is addressing.

The key contrast here is the smallness of the seed and the bigness of the tree. What seems like an insignificant start to the kingdom – a relatively obscure itinerant preacher in Galilee who ends up being executed for treason in a relatively obscure corner of the Roman Empire – inaugurates the glorious coming of the flourishing of all creation.

This is a radical re-imagining of the expectations of the Jewish people – and remember that is the key context into which Jesus was originally speaking.

The kingdom of heaven or of God will not come
by a political or religious overthrowing of the Romans,
but by following in the Way that Jesus teaches,
by becoming disciples or learners of this Jesus of Nazareth
who is revealed through his death, resurrection, and ascension
to be the promised Christ, the Son of God,
the Messiah who begins to restore God's original blessing for all creation.

The parable of the mustard seed
is again about the process of the growth of the kingdom –
it's small beginnings and it's assured ending
in the final triumph of the gifts of the Spirit
in living life with God in a nourishing garden of delight.

So, the questions that set the context for this parable are:
Why is the kingdom not more apparent in our daily lives?
What's the kingdom really like?
Why is loyalty to Jesus as Lord really important?

The answers are:

The kingdom grows slowly, in God's time and with God's care,
but you can be assured that it is growing and God is in charge;
The kingdom is like a delightful garden,
filled with trees and birds and flourishing life shaped by the gifts of the Spirit; and
Jesus Christ is the first-fruits of this new humanity,
of this people called to serve God's original blessing,
of this community of the friends of God in which we are fully alive.

Choosing to be part of the kingdom is choosing life over death.
That's the bottom line.

And the choices about that bottom line
are made in the little things we do everyday.
Do we choose faith over fear?
Do we choose hope over despair?
Do we choose love over indifference?
Choose faith, hope, and love
and you will be making a
significant contribution to the coming of the kingdom.