

Gospel: Mark 4:26-34

Jesus frequently uses parables to teach ordinary people as they are able to hear and understand. Images of sowing and growing show the vitality of God's kingdom.

²⁶[Jesus] said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground,²⁷ and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

³⁰He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³²yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

³³With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

So the sports world in the last week and a half experience something rather phenomenal, and no I'm not referring to any series that ended 4 to 0, but rather for the second time in a few years we have experienced the very difficult feat of a Triple Crown winner. Justify became only the 13th horse in the history of horse racing to win the Kentucky Derby, the Preakness Stakes and the Belmont Stakes. It is an amazing feat.

I do not know much about horseracing but I do know that as a disc jockey you want to get the pole position, the inside track. The inside track gives you the best vantage point and it is the least amount of distance one has to travel to win the race. We often use that phrase "the inside track" when we are wanting some type of advantage or information to achieve a certain goal. We want to know as much information that we can before making any type of major decision in our lives, so that we can step forward not necessarily with a leap of faith, but rather step forward with certainty.

This morning we come to a final section of the Gospel of Mark dealing with all this seed stuff. Besides sheep, seeds are one of the most common illustrations that Jesus uses to describe the incoming reign of God. Today's text has several little vignettes in them. In the first set of verses we hear how the seed grows and the person who sows it really doesn't know how and why that it works. Even today in 2018 with all our science discovery, understanding, and insight that we have, which is a tremendous amount, there still a sense of awe at the miracle of how it all works; that something comes from almost nothing and produces this great plant, fruit, or product.

Jesus says in this text that the planter of the seed does not know how it works, just that he goes to bed and sleeps and wakes up - day and night - and it happens: "wala" at some point the plant ripens for harvesting. Then

at the end of the text, which is the conclusion of all these parables concerning seeds, we hear that Jesus taught the masses of people only in a bunch of parables like this, according to Mark, and that all of them are not detailed here. In fact, it says that Jesus only spoke to them in parables, but did you catch the last line of the verse - but privately he explained it all to his disciples. So, we have a sower who does not understand how it works contrasted with the disciples who get the inside track, the inside scoop on everything. Now it's not like the disciples in the rest of Mark seem to have any sense or better clue to what is going on with Jesus and his mission and his life, because quite honestly, they do not. However, here we get a glimpse that Jesus in private appears to give the disciples inside information. The disciples, have the inside track, if you will.

Perhaps as we try to be a disciple of Christ today, perhaps as we try to live out our Christian life, perhaps as we try to make sense of our world, sense of tragedy, sense of political decisions, sense of governmental leaders who misuse Scripture to promote unbiblical stances, just sense of life in general, we would like to have a private session with Jesus to hear everything explained. However, for most of us, I am guessing that we have had not had many experiences like that. You see if you are like me, one of the things that it seems I often am searching for in my faith life is certainty. I often would rather skip the leap of faith part to my life in God, and would instead prefer some inside information so I would have certainty.

Is certainty the opposite of faith? If you are certain about something does it then need faith? Have you ever been certain about something in life that someone else questioned?

I once got into a goofy argument with someone about something as silly as a road sign. I was talking about a certain intersection and how one

had to wait so long for the light to turn green and that part of the problem was that people were not pulling their cars up far enough in the intersection, that one had to approach a certain point in order to actuate the signal. The person that was listening to my story said what do you mean “actuate the signal?” I said - you know the road sign that you pull your car up far enough into the intersection so as to actuate the signal. The person laughed and said no it doesn’t say actuate it says activate, and an argument ensued over the word actuate versus activate. The individual was sure that no such word appeared on any road sign, but I was certain that it did and I probably took a perverse delight in being correct. In that situation, I did not have faith because I had certainty. Now I can tell you, or even better yet I’m sure Karen can detail for you the number of times that I have been certain without faith, and have proven to be absolutely wrong. My certainty was misplaced. I was flat out wrong as I am many times. However, again when we feel certain about something does it require faith? Can faith ever achieve certainty in our mortal lives? Is certainty helpful to faith?

What is faith? The writer of the book of Hebrews put it this way regarding faith: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Notice that that approach does not contain the word certainty but at best it says the assurance of things hoped for - the conviction of things not seen. Faith is of things we hope for... It is the conviction of things not seen... Not necessarily the inside track or the inside information we may be looking for.

While we strive to have hope in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, while we strive to understand the purpose for our lives as God intended, God does not give us absolute easy visual proof with certainty.

This is especially true with our discipleship, with our mission, with reaching out to others with the gospel message of unconditional forgiveness, unconditional love, and unconditional acceptance. However, we often do not see all the aspects of our endeavors. Instead we hope, instead we pray, instead we trust, instead we focus on what we believe God intends for us to do. Much of our discipleship is like tossing mustard seeds.

Sometimes what we do in our lives for the sake of our church, for the sake of others, for the sake of the world, for the sake of our faith life seems so small, seems just like a mustard seed. But that's exactly what Jesus is saying - it seems so small but yet produces so much. It is indeed the ripple effect of faith. We rarely, if ever, get to see the full shrub of our discipleship that we intend to do for the sake of others, for the sake of the world; but this does not mean that we stop doing those little things, nor does it mean we quit when we do not see the results right away. It reminds us that we are not in charge of the product or the fruit produced, but rather we have been given the gift of sowing seeds.

So perhaps in a way we do have the inside track - because we have faith that the tomb is empty, because we have faith that the world does not get the ultimate authority; because we have hope that death does not have the final say, we have an insight, we have an inside track, we are granted a pole position for seeing the world with a different set of eyes – not one that sees or knows it all, but one that strives to trust that God is with us, God loves us, and God claims us. Amen.