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

He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet 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." With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples. Mark 4:26-34

Jesus has a lot to say about the kingdom of God. The reason Jesus talks so much about the kingdom of God is because it's complicated. It began before creation and will continue until completion at some time in the future that we cannot predict. So, we are living in an already/not yet state of being, where sometimes we can sense the kingdom of God and sometimes we long deeply for it to appear in the midst of tribulation. The kingdom is among us, seen and unseen, already and not yet.

Because describing the kingdom of God is so difficult, Jesus often taught in parables. A parable is layered with meaning, it is puzzling and intriguing. Parables help us see things differently; they make us think. When Jesus explained a parable to his disciples there were many times when they could not understand, so we are in good company.

Today we hear the kingdom of God described by Jesus in two short parables about seeds. What do we know about seeds? They come in various sizes and they are hard on the outside. Pretty non-descript, except that like seeds, we also come in various sizes and can also be hard on the outside sometimes!

The other day I found a packet of seeds in a drawer. They have been in there long enough that I can't even remember where they came from. They appear to be lifeless, inert, dry, and insignificant. I can put this packet of seeds back in the drawer and it is guaranteed that nothing will happen to the seeds. They will remain lifeless. We also know this about seeds – they have to be planted if they are going to grow.

Jesus says that the kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. A seed, by its very nature, will sprout and grow when it is scattered on the ground. As disciples we can try to understand how this describes the kingdom of God. Perhaps the one scattering the seeds is God or perhaps it is the disciples? Is Jesus saying we are all allowed to take a nap every day? Maybe Jesus is teaching us that we need to trust God and be patient and that we don't need to know how, we just need to trust that planted seeds will grow.

In the second parable Jesus does tell us something about how the seeds will grow, how the kingdom of God will grow. It will grow like a weed! It will grow like mustard seed. Everyone who heard Jesus that day would have laughed at the way Jesus compared the kingdom of God to an invasive shrub. No one intentionally planted mustard seed – you didn't need to because it spread like dandelions or kudzu, all on its own. They were all laughing, but they were beginning to understand.

Both of these parables show us what the kingdom of God looks like, and they are so ridiculous that we can't quite believe them. They challenge our sensibilities, our ideas about how we are supposed to do things. They make us stop and think, they stretch our imaginations and might even make us uncomfortable. They suggest that the kingdom of God is unstoppable, invasive, and all-inclusive and that we actually have no control over it.

During communion we will hear an ancient hymn written around 100 AD that beautifully describes God the Father who has planted in our hearts the Holy Name, Jesus. Each time we pray the Eucharistic Prayer together, we lift up our hearts to God, and we allow them to be broken open to new life, over and over again. As disciples of Jesus, we won't always understand God's ways but being together in community builds our trust and patience.

The second verse of our communion hymn talks about the Church, that holy mystery that has endured throughout time, through trials and tribulations, through wars, famines, and plagues, through schism and heresy and unspeakable sin. The Church, as a sign of the kingdom of God, has been as if it is a seed in the dark earth during the pandemic, and even before that it has appeared to be in decline, not looking the way most of us have known it, as we have always described it.

Many are saying that the Church is becoming irrelevant, that it's dying. But is the Church in decline or do we perhaps need to see it differently? Do we need to be the church differently? The catechism in our Book of Common Prayer says the Church's mission is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. The church does this as it prays and worships, proclaims the Gospel, and promotes justice, peace, and love. (BCP, p 855)

Jesus suggests that from time to time we must look for the kingdom of God where we don't expect it, and wait for God to give the growth. As we wait, we offer our hearts to God to be cleansed and conformed for God's purposes, as if broken open, like seeds to new life. We come to the table to be fed, and we look for Resurrection; we look for signs of the kingdom here and now in our midst. Even when, especially when, we see only a field of dark earth, and are uncertain and faltering in our hope, we keep waiting and watching because the kingdom is near!

Don't be surprised if the signs look like hard lifeless seeds, like mustard seed shrubs, or even like dandelions or kudzu. God is at work in both the short term and the long term, seen and unseen, in ways we may never know. The kingdom is among us, hidden and mysterious, even if it's inside an old pack of seeds stored away in a drawer. Look for the seeds, scatter them everywhere, and then watch for the kingdom of God to sprout and grow among us -we do not know how! Amen.

Father, we thank thee who hast planted thy holy Name within our hearts.
Knowledge and faith and life immortal Jesus thy Son to us imparts.
Thou Lord, didst make all for thy pleasure, didst give us food for all our days,
giving in Christ the Bread eternal; thine is the power, be thine the praise.

Watch o'er thy Church, O Lord, in mercy, save it from evil, guard it still,
perfect it in thy love, unite it, cleansed and conformed unto thy will.
As grain, once scattered on the hillsides, was in this broken bread made one,
So from all lands thy Church be gathered into thy kingdom by thy Son.

Words: Greek, ca. 110. tr. F. Bland Tucker
The Hymnal 1982, Hymn 302

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