

## Surprising Seeds

Mark 4: 26-32

In honor of Father's Day, I have a story for you. It seems there was a Jewish father who was very concerned about his son. It was only a year away from his Bar Mitzvah and the boy was sorely lacking in knowledge of the Jewish faith. Consequently, the father decided to send the boy to Israel to experience the heritage there.

A year later, the young man returned home. ††"Father, thank you for sending me to the land of our Fathers". It was wonderful and enlightening, though I must confess that while in Israel, I converted to Christianity." "Oy vey!" moaned the father. "What have I done?"

In the tradition of the patriarchs, the father went to his best friend Mendel for advice and solace. "What should I do?" "Funny you should ask," responded his friend. "I too sent my son to Israel and he also returned a Christian. Vey is mir."

Both went to the Rabbi to ask what they should do. "Funny†you should†ask," said the Rabbi. "I too sent my son to Israel and he also returned a Christian. What is happening to our sons? †Brothers, we must take this to the Lord Himself".

The three fathers†fell to their knees and began to wail and pour out their hearts to the Almighty.† As they prayed, the clouds opened and they heard a Mighty Voice. It said to them, "Funny†you should†ask. †I, too, sent My Son to Israel..."

Father is a familiar image for God. Jesus used it frequently in the Gospels. These days, we are particularly aware of the limitations of this image for our time. It can have unwanted connotations of oppressive patriarchy, sexism, and even abusive behaviors.

I am grateful for the positive father image I have know in my life. Even as my father is in declining health, and I am fathering him in many ways, I still find a powerful resource in the image of father: strong, dependable, and able to stand up to whatever life brings. I am also grateful for fatherly love that is tender, gentle, powerful, and reliable.

Images are vital to understanding our faith in God and our efforts to express the mystery of life itself. We often forget that we, as humans, have a very limited perspective on life, even though we are more aware now than in the past. How little we really see and understand, even now, of the vast universe, even the world closest to us. So much is still a mystery.

Whenever we talk about holy things, we have to use imagery. We use images even about Jesus. What New Testament images can you think of for Jesus? There are several including: Lamb of God, Shepherd, Son of God, and Messiah. Some other images Jesus used include: *born again, heaven, Kingdom (or reign) of God, and Kingdom of Heaven. God's New Creation* is another image from the New Testament that may be more understandable than Kingdom of God for our time. Today's scripture (Mark 4: 26-32) uses two images to describe the image of the Kingdom (new creation) of God.

What is this New Creation of God like? To what can you compare it? Jesus compares it to seeds -- surprising seeds. First, he compares it to seed scattered on the ground. This is not even carefully planted seed in plowed soil. This seed is just scattered on the ground in the technique of that day.

So, the reign of God can be compared to a seed growing. There was no understanding in that day how that growth took place. The emphasis is on the miracle of unseen growth that reveals itself little by little. We don't know how the reign of God works, even within ourselves. We can't know the mind of God. It is mysterious and miraculous.

The second parable compares the reign of God to a mustard seed. To be honest, a mustard seed is probably not the absolute smallest seed. The emphasis here is on the transformation from tiny to huge, like the oak tree from an acorn. The seed is really small and pretty insignificant. It changes to a plant whose comparative size is quite dramatic.

The reign of God is present in the humblest person and in the smallest community. Can you think of other ways of describing the reign of God? Are there other comparisons that work for you?

The reign of God arrived in Jesus. It was insignificant at first, but its future growth was

assured. And, just as the huge oak is already fully present in the acorn, or the large bush in the smallest seed, so the reign of God was also a present reality. Its full blessing and shelter are now available. The emphasis in this parable is on the surprising dynamism of the reign of God.

These are surprising seeds. The first century had little knowledge of plant biology. The process of growth, from seed to plant, was considered a miracle. How much more do we know now how the universe works, how it's put together. Yet, honestly, how little we still know about it. How mysterious and miraculous is God's handiwork!

What about images for today for what the gospels called the Kingdom (or reign) of God? Kingdom language is not very meaningful today. There are really no viable kingdoms today, but in Jesus' time, there very dynamic kingdoms. His generation would have found this image full of meaning for them. Today, *kingdom* images tend to bring to mind chauvinistic, patriarchal, or domineering behaviors; not freeing, "not liberating, barrier-breaking, domination-shattering, and reconciling" ones. Are there other images that are meaningful for you?

Pastor and author Brian McLaren suggests some new images for today for us that might evoke some of the same understanding and passion that Jesus' image of the Kingdom (or reign) of God did in his time. One of these images is the *dream of God*: God's deepest hope, God's deepest passion for us.

Another image is the *party of God*. To illustrate this image, he relates a story. Tony Campolo was speaking at a conference in another city. Having trouble going to sleep afterward, he walked around until he found an all night café. Inside, there were two "ladies of the evening" having a cup of coffee. One of them told the other that this was her birthday, but her announcement was met with ridicule. When he learned that these two came in around this time every night, Campolo organized a birthday party for the next night, complete with a birthday cake. The woman was moved to tears that someone had given her a party. This party is an image for what God does in our lives.

My favorite new image is the dance of God. Dancing is artistic, energetic, in motion, and sensual. It's all about communal partnership. Dr. Harriett Lerner has a book called *The Dance of Intimacy* in which dance is the image for our relationships with each other in God. The community of those who have been part of the Girls-to-Women retreat this weekend are such a community. So is Crossroads Church. The community of those gathered in this room today is a living image of what Jesus might have called the *Kingdom of God*.

I am particularly fond of the dance image. Make no mistake about it, I am not a graceful or coordinated dancer in my body, but I am in my heart and in my soul. We are all called to this dance – called to invite each other, and others around us, to join in the dance.

Ken Medema has a song called *At the Crossroads*. The words offer us an image of the *Kingdom of God* found here at Crossroads. Let it be an image for us:

Come take my hand.  
You are my friend. We're strangers no more.  
Help me to stand.  
I hear the music beyond the door.  
Come and dance here at the Crossroads  
Holy ground and sacred land.  
Come and dance here with your best friend  
Maybe take a stranger's hand.  
Come surrender to the rhythm  
Though it means you take a chance  
Take the step!  
Take the risk!  
Come and dance!