

The Real Jesus, Mark 4:1-34, Kingdom Stories, 3/6/22

Ukraine help.

As devastating and grievous as this Russian invasion on Ukraine is, when we look at it through the lens of geo-political history it is not all that surprising. This is virtually how all world powers, all kingdoms have worked since the beginning. A ruler comes, has the ambition to expand his kingdom and sets out to do so by military force, coercion or political persuasion. Ganges Khan, Pharaohs of Egypt, Alexander the Great, Napoleon or the Emperors of Rome...Or the European expansion in the West. This is just how kingdoms work and have always worked. In Chapter 4 Jesus, through the use of parables, shows us how the Kingdom of God works, and what we are going to learn today is that God's kingdom is completely unlike any other kingdom that has ever come to Earth- not through force of the sword but the planting of a seed. What some theologians call "A Paradoxical Kingdom." A paradox is two things that would seem to be contradictory but when you really lean in for a closer consideration they actually work together brilliantly. Now I was googling paradoxes because I was going to share an example, and it sent me down a youtube wormhole that left my brain hurting, so I will spare you. **Three Paradoxes of the Kingdom of God: #1 The Kingdom Comes Through Humble Listening. #2 The Kingdom Comes Through a Small Seed. #3 The Kingdom Works Inside Out.**

4 Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. ² He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: ³ "Listen!

Now stop there. This is a critical word. Listen! In fact it is so important that in this section of 4 parables Jesus will repeat this word 14x. *Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.* Now we would expect that if Jesus is telling us to listen- he would tell us something clear. That's how it works with my kids- I want to get their attention- "Take out your air pods, look me in the eye, now listen. I need you to go walk the dog, clean his paws then you can have screen time. Do you understand the words coming out of my mouth?" Clear. But that's not what Jesus does here. He says, "Listen!" And then proceeds to tell them a series of mysterious riddles, called parables. "There's this farmer and he's scattering seeds and they fall on four different soils and they all have different outcomes. Birds eat some of them, some wither, some get choked by weeds, others grow and produce lots of fruit. Got it?" And they basically reply "Huh?" Why would Jesus do that? This seems counterintuitive, doesn't it? In all the preaching and communication classes I've taken they never say, "Now try to be as confusing and unclear as you can with your audience." Now, often I hear people say that Jesus gave parables so that these really basic, not-so-smart people could understand him. Not what he says. ¹¹ **He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables ¹² so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!"**

Jesus quotes from Isaiah 6 which helps us unlock what Jesus is saying here. Isaiah was called to preach the truth to a hard-hearted people who refused to listen. Jesus is surrounded by crowds

of people, some following him out of suspicion who are trying to trap him, most are following him because they want what they can get out of him. And Jesus says, I'm using these parables to filter out who really wants to follow me and who doesn't. Just like the same sun that melts wax hardens clay. So it is with the parables. Now you may notice the disproportionate amount of verses on this first parable compared to the other three, and that only this parable Mark shows us Jesus' explanation. Why is that? Well this first parable is like a parable decoder ring for the others. I can't help thinking about **A Christmas Story [Picture]** when I say decoder ring. Remember Ralphie finally gets the decoder ring in the mail, he's so excited and he's solving the mystery and of course it's a huge disappointment, "Drink more Ovaltine." This first parable unlocks how parables work, but only for those who really want Jesus. Only for those who know they need a savior, who need a doctor for their sin-sick hearts will be drawn into the mysteries and receive salvation, healing, transformed hearts. And those who just want a miracle, who think they are just fine, who can save themselves will walk away unchanged, unaffected. This tells us something critical about how God works.

Jesus comes to the world as a gentleman, not a dictator. He doesn't force himself on anyone who doesn't him. Friends, the only people that can receive the kingdom of God, the saving gospel- are **humble listeners**. Those who will draw closer, seek to understand, listen more intently to the word of God, who are open the still small voice of the Spirit in your soul.

The Kingdom of God is also paradoxical because **#2 The Kingdom Comes Through a Small Seed**. Three of the four parables that Jesus shares compare the kingdom, the gospel message of Jesus, to a seed. Sower and the seed in v.3-20, again in v.26-29, and then more specifically a mustard seed in v.30-34.

Of all images that Jesus could have used to describe the Kingdom, he uses a seed. No kingdom on earth would have ever compared their kingdom to something so insignificant as a seed. When the kingdom of Alexander the Great came to your town it wasn't a seed...it was more like a giant boulder coming to smash your entire town. You either died trying to prevent his kingdom, or you surrender. It was a kingdom of force and coercion. But that's not how Jesus described his kingdom, He says, "It's like a tiny seed." I mean how weak! You don't drop a seed into the soil and say "Duck and cover! Bombs Away!"¹ When you drop a seed you may even have a hard time finding it, it makes no noise, and for a long time you may not even know that it was dropped. It's really quite unimpressive.

But for those who receive him, the seed has paradoxically immense power compared to a boulder. Imagine a huge boulder coming and smashing into a field. It makes an impact on the field.² Certainly. And at first blush you would say that is far more powerful than a **mustard seed [Picture]**, which you could crush between your fingers. And yet, if you drop a mustard seed in that field, over time that **tree [picture]** would dwarf that boulder and completely transform the entire landscape and ecology of that field and it would bring all kinds of life to that field, more

¹ Thanks to Tim Keller for this phrase in a Sermon from 1992.

² Again, thanks Tim Keller for the boulder vs. seed concept, Sermon from 1992.

trees, animals, oxygen production...In fact that single mustard seed has the power to cover the entire planet with wood. The boulder can't produce life because only the seed has biological life inside of it. This is Jesus' point. Putin's military power display will never bring life, it will never win the hearts of the people of Ukraine. God's Miracles and laser light shows, and displays of power don't change hearts. Romans 1- The gospel is the power of God unto salvation. The love story of a humble God who came to save a rebellious people by giving his life. That has the biological and spiritual properties to transform your life, your family, your community, your nation, our entire world. Is that the paradoxical power of the gospel seed that is coursing through you?

Some of you have resisted Jesus, resisted the gospel...or are struggling mightily with surrendering to him and being changed by him because you are unimpressed and underwhelmed with how Jesus' kingdom works. You are expecting him to operate like human kingdoms. "If Jesus was real, why doesn't he just show up with power, do some crazy miracles and then everyone will believe? He should just come down and smite Putin. Then there would be no more doubts. Why is there still evil? Why am I suffering? Why doesn't he come like a boulder! That's what I want." That's not how his kingdom works. He doesn't overpower us with coercive techniques to beat us into submission or political propaganda campaign for mind control- he comes gentle and humble in heart. He comes wooing us through love and honesty, he comes through whispers more than shouts, he comes subtly to open the eyes of your heart to your need for him. He's desirous not demanding.

#3 The Kingdom Works Inside Out.

How is the gospel power released to transform our lives? Well it happens organically like a seed, not synthetically like a log pile. Let's say we have a log pile. Can we grow that pile of logs? Sure, stack more on top of it. But that's synthetic growth. Organic growth is not a log pile, but an oak tree. Growing deeper, taller, spreading out its branches, reaching to the sun. Synthetic growth is trying to win the favor of your boss through extra hard work in order to get the promotion. "I perform, therefore you owe me." Organic growth is having your heart melted by someone's unconditional love for you to the degree that you want to be a far better version of yourself. It's a motivation that comes from somewhere much deeper, much purer. Jesus compares Synthetic growth to the religion of the pharisees. Growth of religion may produce changes to the will and behaviors, but it will not get down into the heart. But Jesus came to plan a seed in our hearts, for a love relationship with us.

Now for the gospel to have organic growth in our lives it needs to go deep enough into the soil. The more I read this parable, the more I realize that it's not so much about who's saved and who's unsaved...certainly there are implications. But it's about organic growth in the Christian life. Notice in the parable of the seed and the sower, the key is depth. The first doesn't go in at all. The 2nd seed goes in, but it's too shallow so it doesn't grow roots. Some people get really excited about Jesus because he does something for them that improves their quality of life, but as soon as the hard times come, you realize that they wanted what Jesus could give them to improve their life, not Jesus himself. The 3rd soil goes in deep enough, but the problem is that it goes in at the same depth and location as the thorns. The gospel is there, but it's vying for other

loves, other loyalties in our lives. Some of you are Christians, you believe in Jesus but you are living for your money, living for your security and safety, or living out your sexuality in a way that dishonors God. And you are unhappy. Why? You are trapped. You are being choked by your divided heart.

The paradoxical power of the gospel seed transforms when we work the seed deeper, beyond the layer of head knowledge about God and Jesus and the Bible. It must go deeper than other loves, other idols, deeper than self-centeredness, deeper than your career, it has to go deeper than your love of money, power, family, your ambitions or your safety. You have to be willing to uproot what vies for your loyalty. You have to allow the seed to penetrate through those layers to your heart where it can take root. You must think on it, ponder it, meditate on it and work it into your whole being, you must speak it out and claim it for yourself. Only then will the gospel truly transform all areas of your life, even the darkest parts of our soul.

Our nation is talking a lot about the problem of racism. How do you eradicate racism? I'm not talking about external manifestations, I'm talking about the sin of racism in the heart. Interestingly enough, this topic shows up in Galatians 2, Peter reveals his favoritism and segregationist tendencies by refusing to associate with the Gentile Christians and instead only hangs out with the Jewish believers. What did Paul tell him? Stop being racist or God will get you? No, that's synthetic religion, trying to curb behavior through fear of punishment. Did he say, "Everyone break ties with Peter and block him on social media" or "We are kicking you out as an apostle." That's synthetic methods of our modern day cancel culture, that drives racism more deeply embedded in the soul. What does Paul say, "Your behavior doesn't align with the gospel that we know." Think of what Jesus did for you, he was excluded for you- crucified outside the gate for you, how can you exclude anyone else? Look at what he's done to forgive you. Meditate and ponder his love and allow the Spirit to take that truth deeper into the soil of your soul and melt your heart and change you.

G. Campbell Morgan- Told a story about how he was in Italy and he visited a graveyard where some of the most powerful dignitaries were buried. And at one of the graves there was this huge, enormously thick marble gravestone covering the grave. And at some point, an Acorn must have fell into the grave, and somehow, over many years had grown inside the grave to the point where it had cracked that marble slab and rolled it off the grave into two pieces. Isn't that amazing, an acorn, that if you threw it at the marble, would break into pieces and not even leave a mark on the marble, and yet if you give it a chance, can do something from the inside out that 100 men couldn't do. That's the power of the gospel.

How do we know? Because Jesus didn't come as a boulder, Jesus came as a seed. He said it himself in **John 12:24 Unless a seed falls to the ground and dies it remains only a single seed. But if it dies it bears much fruit.** He did it. He died...but the power of that seed after 3 days rolled that huge boulder from the grave and the risen Savior came bursting out.

I don't care what kind of marble slab is over your heart. What addiction, fear, hurt, sin, loathsome self-image, how messed up you are...you bring in Jesus, it has the power to crack it, roll it off. It has the power to change you, your family, your circumstances, your whole life.

Communion