

# Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

## Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

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### **Of Parables and Private Explanations**

Mark 4:26-34

When I was a Boy Scout our troop along with many others was asked to help thin out the cedar seedlings in the forest preserve where the Scout camp was located. Apparently there was a bumper crop of seedlings that year, so many that the health of the forest would be threatened if they were left to grow together. Either that or there was concern about the fire danger the overabundance of seedlings represented. We were told to leave one seedling about one every three or four feet. That would allow the seedling that remained to grow strong without having to compete with others nearby.

I took one seedling home with me, planted it in a large coffee can, watered it occasionally, and kept it in my bedroom for around a year or so, I'd guess. How it survived that ordeal, I'll never know. But it did. Finally, I planted it in our front yard, with my Father's permission, of course. There was, however, one problem. I planted it too close to the road. When I later asked my Dad why he let me plant it there, he told me that he never expected it to live — the seedling was so frail and so small. But live it did. It must have been over 20 feet tall when we had to remove it because it was causing traffic problems. On several occasions a car missed the turn and hit the tree. They were going too fast for the turn of course, but that's beside the point. The last one to hit the tree damaged it so severely that it had to be removed.

When my family moved into that house on the Oklahoma prairie in 1951, we were surrounded by grass and weeds, cactus and rocks, a few elms and scrub oaks, but there were no cedar trees. Today, thanks to the birds there are hundreds of cedars in the area, mostly along the fencerows where the birds dropped them. From one scrawny seedling cedar, planted in the wrong place, a small forest of cedars grew, spreading over a large area.

The kingdom of God is like that, Jesus says. It starts out incredibly small and scrawny such that nobody thinks it really has a chance. But over time it grows strong and tall giving shelter to many. What begins as an easily ignored or dismissed and insignificant seedling turns into quite an attention-getter. Birds gather in its branches and eat of its fruit. Its offspring create an abundance of trees where there were none before. And all comes about regardless of human action. To be sure, the kingdom of God is not exclusive of human action. I planted that seedling. But the marvelous growth was not my doing. After I planted that seedling, I may have watered it a couple of times, but that's all. I went on being a boy without a care in the world, much less worrying about that seedling. Meanwhile, God was bringing about a marvelous miracle of growth right before my eyes.

But is that all Jesus meant by telling those parables? Is that all Mark wants us to learn from his linking those two parables together? Are we simply to learn that we plant and God gives the growth? Or is there more? I always thought parables were quaint little stories that everybody could understand. Even the Scriptures say that. But if that's true, why does Jesus always have to explain them to his disciples? Were the disciples that dense? Or is there more to parables than meets the eye?

Some say that Mark portrays the disciples as particularly dense. That may explain why Jesus is always explaining things to them privately. On the other hand, maybe Jesus is just being a good teacher, making sure they understand what he's talking about, not leaving anything to chance. We really don't know. And speculation like that merely diverts us from the more important message Jesus is conveying: the Kingdom of God is near.

So what is the kingdom of God that Jesus talks about? Remember at the very beginning of Mark's Gospel he says that Jesus came preaching, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe in the gospel." But what is the kingdom of God? And what do we have to do to get there?

Apparently the kingdom of God is not first and foremost about something you and I do. It's about trusting God to keep God's promises. It's about believing that God will bring great growth out of our small and seemingly insignificant actions. Instead of having to do something to bring in the kingdom, apparently we are expected to go about our lives trusting God and waiting for the harvest. That doesn't mean we have nothing to do. But it does mean we're to do what we do trusting God. The kingdom of God is like a person who trusts God enough to plant seeds and then go on about his or her business.

In the first parable the sower planted the seed and left the rest up to God. No worry. No anxiety over weeds in the garden. No fussing over the plants making sure they grow straight. "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." No need for manipulative methods to "make it work." Faith grows mysteriously by the power of God. No need to pressure a person to make a decision for Christ. No need for special effects of any kind. A simple witness, a life lived trusting God, is all that is needed. Insignificant people doing insignificant things are significant in God's plan.

The sower demonstrates a spirit of confidence and faith. The sower plants the seeds. Once planted the seeds grow. When the grain is ripe for harvest, the sower harvests the grain. The kingdom of God is like that. In God's kingdom people do what they can, trusting God to do the rest. In God's kingdom people don't necessarily understand how everything works. But when the time is right, they are ready to act. Where people live that way, something like the kingdom of God is already present.

Or consider the contrast between small seed and mature plant. Isn't it amazing what can come from something so small? The kingdom of God is like that. One little act of kindness often grows to incredible proportions. One prayer prayed, one caring touch, one kind word, one scripture read at the right time brings amazing peace into a troubled life. Dare we believe that peace is possible in a time when nations continue in civil strife? Dare we believe that God's kingdom is present and spreading in a time when our society seems in deep distress? Dare we believe that love planted in fields of inter-personal relationships can grow into international peace possibilities? There are times when the prospect of world peace seems remote at best. Yet where does one begin? The kingdom of God is like a tiny seed, that in spite of all the odds, will germinate, grow and bear fruit.

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. When planted it seems like the smallest seed in the world. When planted it appears insignificant, incapable of anything substantial. Yet when it grows to maturity it looks like the grandest bush ever. Or maybe we dare to say the kingdom of God is like a community where people of different tastes and different backgrounds gather together to worship and share a meal. No matter how large or small it is today, someday it'll

encompass the whole world. No matter that we don't understand how that may come to be. What matters is that we, like the sower, trust God enough to plant the seeds we have to plant knowing God will give the growth. The operative words are trusting God to give the growth.

In a time when random violence makes headlines it isn't easy to believe the kingdom of God is near. But those who trust God do the little things they can do that bear witness to their faith. Trusting God we understand that a small first step is the beginning of a long and important journey. Trusting God we know that our lives of faith make a difference, even if we can't see that difference right away. Trusting God we plant scrawny seedlings even if we aren't sure they'll live. Trusting God we marvel at what can come from such a small beginning even when we may have planted it in the wrong place. Let us live trusting God, marveling at the power and grace of God at work in our midst and in the world around us.