

## Provocations

There are parables, and then there are parables. Some parables are involved, like the story of the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son, some are pretty obvious in what they mean, but others... well, we are sometimes left asking what is going on here. These are two of the latter sort, I think, in part because the examples he uses are actually not that great. First of all the parable about the kingdom of heaven being like the process of planting and growing. Now it is true that ancient people did not know as much about science as we do, but they were not, as we sometimes imagine in our arrogance, idiots. Ancient people were, in fact the ones that learned to domesticate wild plants and produce crops. True they may not have known about mitosis and photosynthesis, but they knew quite a lot about how to farm and garden. In other words, I don't think there was this mysterious element to growing plants. He's not saying that the kingdom of heaven is like a mystery, but rather that it is something that happens organically, without our control, but often with our cooperation.

Likewise the mustard seed parable, has some quirks. Mustard is a small seed and a mustard plant can grow to some size, but the seed is not the smallest and the plant is not the biggest, or by any measure the greatest. See it occurs to me that these parables are actually parables that exhibit how parables work, which is sort of akin to the way the kingdom of heaven works. And this reason is actually rather important for us to understand so that we don't fall into the trap of trying to make them mean what we want them to mean. Tacked on to this reading is the explanation that Jesus always taught in these parables and taught nothing to the masses except parables.

There are several reasons why this might be. Maybe the parables gave him some sort of cover to lay out a critique of the powerful and dangerous people in charge. Maybe the parables were some sort of code to encourage the formation of an in group, cued up by a phrase like, "let him who has ears to hear listen." I think though that the parables are meant to function like seeds, or provocations. They are invitations and challenges to us who see the world one way to turn around and see it differently. The thing is, it's really hard, pretty much impossible actually, to force people to step outside their own frame of reference and see a new truth, like say the Kingdom of Heaven.

What Jesus does is tell these stories, sometimes they are just like thought seeds. They get planted when you hear them, even if you don't fully wrestle with them, they stick there and germinate in the dark, in ways you might not even understand, but the things can grow if they are given room. The most effective way to do this is to make it not look like much at first. If you present people with a life-shaking challenge like laying down your life or taking up a cross, they're going to wonder why and probably get scared off. If you present them with a small question that will eventually erupt into something bigger... well transformation and growth might be possible. These parables are about how the kingdom of heaven operates: it starts small and it can move in ways we don't always see coming, but when you learn to see how it goes they actually become less surprising.

This is the thing about parables, you have to learn to look at them upside down, and once you do that they become these potent truth bombs that will sprout and bear fruit in your soul and in your life. Let's practice with these two parables. "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed and would sleep and rise and the seed would sprout and grow, and he does not know how." That's the thing that I mentioned already, but think for a second here, what exactly is being described here, do we need to identify the parties involved, as is sometimes helpful, or are we looking wrong? This is a description of how the kingdom of God works, it happens when the seed is "scattered," it also happens when we go

about our daily routines and the seeds are growing while we sleep, and these things happen without our knowledge, but when it's time they bear fruit. The fruit the parables are designed to bear is the fruit of recognizing the Kingdom of God in our lives, here, where we are. It is not always necessary that the Kingdom of God be stunning and supernatural, sometimes it's just being kind, or showing mercy, or generosity.

God is willing to work in this natural course of things, through us and in our world. It can start with something small, like a mustard seed. Mustard is essentially a weed. I think what Jesus is actually referencing here is the way that mustard can be invasive, it can just take over from one little seed. Parables function like that, because they're not fragile, finicky things, they can grow in all different places. And what Jesus says about the mustard plant in the end is true, it gives shelter to the birds of the air, and who doesn't love birds. What the parable teaches you one time through, might not always be the same thing, but like mustard it can grow into other areas of your life. For instance, you might read the prodigal son story at some point and identify with the prodigal, you might read it another time and identify with the father, and you might read it again and identify with the older brother, and in each one of those people, you might find multiple aspects that resonate in your heart. The way you might learn from just the plant itself one time might be different from what you learn or think based on the birds building nests, the point is you need to keep your mind and heart open to these parables. Never think that you know all that a parable has to teach you. In this way these parables are actually self-referential, they tell you one insight about the Kingdom of God and they also teach you something about parables as a means of communication.

People in Jesus' day, like people now, tend to want things to mean what they mean. They want a "right" answer. Parables don't work that way, they are living things, creeping and growing in ways you cannot control. That's why Jesus used them so much and so well. Our sinful nature wants control of things, but the Kingdom of God is like growing things, living things, things that are filled with the same creative force that God uses to create. The Kingdom of God is designed to operate by the rules of love, and love and control are not the same thing. In fact, our confusion of the two is a deep, foundational sin. Remember the temptation in the Garden of Eden was not, "hey this fruit tastes better than all the rest," it was rather, "eat this and you will be like God," in other words you will be the one in control and not have to deal with all these picayune little rules God made for you. The tempter tells us that God wants us to play by the rules so that he won't get angry. What Jesus is trying to tell us is that the Kingdom of God is trying to happen among us and we have to leave room for it to grow. We have to pay attention to the small things that happen and learn to tell the difference between chaos, violence and destruction, and life in which everything, even some things that seem disordered, have their place and function.

Teaching in Parables is a way of having your teaching be alive, because it involves the participation of those who hear. The Kingdom of God is also like that, it involves the participation of those who are a part of it. It works both ways, by opening ourselves to the Kingdom, we are changed, and the rather shocking inverse of that, by opening itself to us, the Kingdom is changed, because it is different thanks to the individual light that we each bring, nothing is too small to make a difference, or to be outside of the purposes of God's loving creativity. If you think it's dangerous to create things this way, it is, but it's the reason God is who God is.