



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## The Mysterious Kingdom of God

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

June 14, 2009

*Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)*

**Mark 4:26-34**

If you have spent any time around a child at all—whether in your own home or in one of the classrooms here at the church—you know that a child will often pour their heart and soul into some drawing. When they finish it, they clutch it tightly in their hands and come running to present it to you. And you know the feeling that creates. It’s a feeling that can only be described as a mixture of pure joy and absolute terror. Joy, because they have created something just for you. And terror, because you know that there is a great likelihood that they aren’t going to tell you what they have drawn, but that they will want you to identify it.

I have lost count of the times that I have fallen into the trap myself. “Do you know what this is, Daddy?” one of my children will ask me wide-eyed as they rush their latest creation to me. There ought to be some sort of guide for us parents and teachers, really.

If you have ever dared an answer—as I have done far more times than I care to admit—then you know the danger of trying to say exactly what it “is” too quickly, or with too much certainty. In fact, a child’s drawing is really a whole new world that they are holding out for you to explore with them. The meaning must be teased out.

And though we forget it far too often as the church, Jesus’ parables work the same way. In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus, clutching his latest parable in his hands, keeps running up to us and we can’t help ourselves. We are so eager to say exactly what it means that we forget that Jesus is really inviting us into the new world the parable opens to us. We do to parables what one poet argues we do to poems when we read them—it’s as if we tie the parables to a chair with rope and torture a confession out of it. We begin beating it with a hose to find out what it really mean (in a poem from Billy Collins).

So today, instead of tying these parables to a chair, I want to hold them up to the light like a color slide, or better still, I want us to walk into these parables’ rooms and feel the walls for a light switch.

About 15 years ago I was part of a group being led on a tour through the university town of Heidelberg, Germany. Our tour guide was an older, but feisty, German woman who offered us some amazing insights as we walked the streets of the city. Like many European towns, the city was built around a large cathedral that commands your attention from just about anywhere in the city. There were several other large church buildings along some of the side streets as well. There was no doubt that the church’s presence had been central in Heidelberg for centuries.

Whether it was part of every tour or not, I don’t know, but our guide stopped us at one spot on the main street and directed our attention up a side street, at the top of which was the second largest church in the city. She wanted us to see the church, of course, but she was also interested in pointing out something else. Remember, our guide had a feisty

streak in her. She called our attention to the sign marking one of the businesses right outside of the church. Let's just say that the sign—written in English—announced the sale of all sorts of items that aren't typically found just a few steps from the front door of a church. Our guide, with a little less twinkle in her eye, wistfully announced, "Sometimes I think the church is losing ground."

Have you ever felt that way? That the church was losing ground? I suspect many of us have. We read the papers and hear about drastic losses in all of the so-called mainline churches. We see towns that are not marked by hospitality to the stranger, even though they are filled with churches. We hear competing voices calling to us and we know that the values of the kingdom often clash with the values of culture and we're scared to death which values our children will choose. And we feel ourselves gripped by fear—terrorized in so many ways—even though the church has been announcing that perfect love removes all fear. Do you ever feel that we're losing ground?

If so, then you understand why these parables are so important to Mark's church. They were being persecuted on all fronts—by the Jews and by the Romans—and wherever they looked it seemed as if they were being hounded by resistance, challenged by ignorance, and overcome by their seeming insignificance. They had precious little going for them to begin with and even that was under attack.

And you know the temptation that comes to us in those times, don't you? It's the temptation to think that we've got to make things happen if they're going to happen. And so we begin to say with words or actions something like this: "It's obvious God's not going to do anything about it, so by golly we're going to." And we start making all sorts of pronouncements and, if we're not careful, we will take God's invitation to join in God's work and turn it into a call for us to be God.

So, in light of that, how do we hear this parable Jesus tells: "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."

I'll tell you what some have heard. They have heard a reminder that God is the one who does all things. Tired of all the bravado that announced "a Christian century" and talked about us building the kingdom of God, they even wrote a new text to the old hymn. Instead of singing "rise up, o child of God" they encouraged the church to sing this hymn: "Sit down, O child of God, God's kingdom He will bring, Whenever it may please His will; You cannot do a thing."

But, while that may be true—God will indeed bring in God's kingdom—it's also true that God has called us to be partners in this on-going work of redemption, or as our vision statement puts it—to join boldly with the Spirit's work in the world. We cannot use the promises of God as excuses for doing nothing. No, our task is to scatter the seed. And that's why we do things like what we're doing in worship today. That's why we take a small child—Abigail—and baptize her into this story of God's love and why we will do all that we can to support Larry and Kim in the promises they will make at the font today.

That's why we're sending a youth mission team to do work in Asheville next

month.

That's why we will be scattering the seed at Vacation Bible School in a few weeks.

That's why we've spent so much time dreaming dreams and imaging what we can do to join God in the places where God is alive and at work to bring wholeness and healing to the world.

In all of these ways and in countless others, we are doing our best to scatter the seed of the gospel, trusting God for the growth. And that's where this other parable takes shape, for these are but small, simple acts. Looking on today, it may seem that we are doing such simple, ordinary things. But through these parables Jesus insists that we can have absolute confidence that the rhythms of God's care are taking place whether we want it, understand it, or notice it. It is the mystery of God's kingdom that is alive and at work in the world beyond our understanding.

You see, I have no idea how God will use these seeds we scatter here—or that you scatter in the places where you will go from this place. But I do know this: Somehow, by the mystery of God's grace, all of God's hopes for this world will be made real and all flesh shall see the glory of God.