

## 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – 06-17-18

I suspect that most of us like a good story. That's why we read books and watch movies; why we sit around a campfire or stay up late at night talking. There is something compelling about a good story that engages us, draws us in, challenges us and even changes us.

Today we find ourselves in the fourth chapter of Mark's gospel. This is a chapter of parables.

For Jesus' audience, the parables covered common ground: the people knew about shepherds and sheep, lost coins, vineyards, unjust judges and wayward children. The parables were easy for his hearers to relate to, because they dealt with practical, down-to-earth matters.

Maybe not so much for our 21<sup>st</sup> century, urban, western society.

Yet, they are meaning-filled and provocative stories. Often they turn on a pivotal point, a turn of phrase, something one might not expect, that can leave us feeling a bit confused, uncomfortable or challenged.

Some parables may start out as a clever tale, but then they can jerk the rug out from under us, turning our world upside down and challenging some of our basic assumption about ourselves, our neighbors, our world, our God.

They grab our hearts and minds and twist them into a new position, a fresh awareness. Ultimately the insights and enlightenment they provide encourage us – drive us – to change our way of thinking, of being human, of being Catholic.

Parables draw us in, softly and subtlety. Then they hit us with the sledge hammer of revelation. They are revolutionary, subverting reality and undermining the existing structures and systems and relationships and attitudes that keep us separated, suspicious and judgmental.

The parables always point to the Kingdom of God, to what God envisions, to what God is up to. They pierce us and make us painfully aware of our need to change the way we relate to ourselves, others and God.

Jesus tells parables to break through our deafness, our stubbornness and our hardness of heart. He longs that we become “kingdom” people, his disciples. He not only longs for us to hear, but to be, for Jesus is the ultimate parable of the Father, the ambassador of the Kingdom of God.

With that as background, a few reflections on today’s two parables. What grabbed me was the phrase, “the seed would sprout and grow, he knows not how.”

Much of life, and certainly the life of God’s kingdom, a life of faith is full of unknowns. Again and again we are invited to trust God. Yet it seems so hard to follow Jesus, to live by the teaching of his Church, to be obedient when we want to do it our way and to be in control, in charge.

To trust in God and to surrender to God’s plan enfolded in Jesus, the living parable of the Father is the challenge of this parable. In what and how are you, me, being asked to trust more deeply in Jesus and his Church?

The mustard seed...

A week after I told you that I was diagnosed with ALS, a kind Vietnamese family gave me this. It is a tiny stone engraved with the word “faith” and a single mustard seed glued to it encased in clear plastic. These words were attached, “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, nothing will be impossible. The smallest bit of faith can move mountains.”

It sat on the table next to my bed unopened until yesterday. I would often look at it and realize how little faith I had, how little trust I seemed to place in God’s plan for me and my ALS.

When I opened it during my prayer on Friday morning, it struck me that any seed is only worthwhile when it planted in the ground, when it no longer appears as a simple seed, but sprouts and grows, becoming what it was created for.

This is true of each of us. As Jesus says in John's gospel, chapter 12, "Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain. But if it dies, it produces a rich harvest."

If we don't trust and surrender to God's plans, if we live calling all the shots, then we will never become fully who we were created to be, the best version of ourselves as Matthew Kelly would say.

This is scary stuff for many of us. I know it is for me. Trusting that God will bring a harvest from me and for me as I lose control of my hands, as I can no longer button my shirts or tie my shoes or distribute Holy Communion without struggle challenges me deeply.

And I know that my struggle is nowhere near what others face with chronic illness or disabilities, or those who do not have adequate medical care, or those who live on garbage dumps and pick through the garbage of others in order to find enough on which to live.

My prayer is so often that of another father in the gospels asking Jesus to cure his daughter, "I do believe. Help my unbelief."

Maybe that's the mustard seed for me today, and maybe for you as well. Who, but God, knows what the harvest might be if we but trust and, as St. Paul says, "Walk by faith and not by sight."