

Preached by Carl Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA 22310
Sunday June 14, 2009

I Samuel 15:34—16:13
Mark 4: 26–34

GOD LOOKS ON THE HEART

The story of Daniel selecting a successor for Saul and the story of the parables in Mark give us a lesson in how we are to be disciples. When Jesus tells a parable, he invites his listeners to open their hearts and their lives to God's word at work in them.

In fact, if you want a little extra help when you're reading the book, the Gospel according to Mark, there are some classic and yet timely instructions. Often I hear people ask, "Where should I go in the Bible to start reading again? I've forsaken the habit. I've stopped reading and I want to get back into the word."

I like Mark. He's straight-forward. And when I advise people to go to Mark, I tell them to look for one of three themes. It's in all the parables and it's in most of the verses we read from Mark. Mark is either going to tell us who Jesus is, or Mark is going to tell us how God is bringing the kingdom into our world, or Mark is going to tell us what is the path for disciples to take—three categories. If you are about to take the biblical exegesis exam, you should that word with you. If you are preparing to become a Presbyterian minister and are a little frightened about all the tests that lie ahead of you, remember these lessons from Mark. Who is Jesus? How is God bringing the kingdom into being? And what am I supposed to be as one of his disciples?

In this parable, the farmer is the disciple. In this parable, disciples are told they need to sow seeds. The reason Jesus taught with parables and not with hard and fast rules is that parables say lot. The seeds can become God's truth for all of creation. The seeds can be God's word. The seeds can be faith lived out in community. The seeds can be trusting and hope, where there seems to be none. It can be the tiniest of action in our daily lives.

My daughter loves to quote Mother Teresa where she says, "When we speak, we either point toward Christ or we point toward darkness." That's pretty powerful explanation of what we say—how much it means. I didn't know this, but Mother Teresa actually had business cards she passed out to those who came to her. I had a friend who called her or e-mailed her or texted her (or whatever was popular at that time) or sent something as common as an ordinary letter. He wanted her to do a public service announcement. And being a guy who always went for the best, this guy asked Mother Teresa to do a public service announcement.

Mother Teresa wrote back that she didn't do that sort of thing, but my friend was welcome to come and work with her in Calcutta—which he did. And on her business card, which he showed me, were these words: "The fruit of silence is prayer. The fruit of

prayer is faith. The fruit of faith is love. The fruit is love is service. The fruit of service is peace.”

Today all those words sound so simple and easy to accomplish, don't they? But you know it's never as easy as simply scattering seed. We're called to be more than Johnny Appleseed Christians. We're called to a specific path in a specific place with other disciples. We're called to be obedient in daily tasks. One mandate of discipleship is to share not only in spreading the seed, but in gathering the harvest. We're so far removed from our agrarian roots that harvest for us does not always have the positive connotation that it would in first century Galilee.

When you gather the harvest, it's all positive. When we talk about the harvest today, we think about judgment. We have a punitive aspect of what we refer to as a spiritual harvest. It doesn't exist in Mark. We impose that on the scripture ourselves. There's nothing negative here.

Jesus says even in the ignorance of being someone who doesn't understand what God is doing, God will use us in a positive harvest—a harvest of community and souls. Now we can't make that seed grow, and I don't believe we still completely understand how it germinates, but we can be obedient. We can be participants in the mysterious forces of God at work in our world.

And that's amazing. God is going to bring about the miracle of a harvest, and God invites us to share with one another what that means. Did I mention that we already know Mark liked to teach about the kingdom that God is bringing into being? It's like a parable about the mustard seed. It's about God doing just that.

Yes, we have limitations. Yes, we have things that we cannot fully comprehend in our own faith journey or in the lives of those around us. Yes, we still struggle with the power of evil and with sin. And we struggle to understand what it means when bad things happen to seemingly innocent people. But in spite of our limitations, we are expected to be able to look around and discern God's plan that has been growing all along. Night and day, the kingdom has been growing in our midst.

What's been growing in your life? What parable has been taking shape? What story is developing in you because of the gospel? Where in your life has the good news of Christ's love and God's kingdom been prompting you to act and to speak, remembering that every word either points to Christ or it points to darkness?

What parable would Jesus offer up to explain the kingdom? Would it be that parable of a relationship with another Christian where all the joy has been taken away? Would it be the parable of the kids who will not clean up their rooms, and so we fear that one day they won't be able to order their own lives? Will it be the parable of the over-stressed teacher ... and before you say amen ... or the parable of the pupil who they try to teach? Could it be the parable of the parents who don't have a clue what to do next?

Or maybe it's the parable that's being lived out right now as Bush Hill Presbyterians. A parable of Christian friends who really do care about one another, especially during times of struggle—the parable of Christians and disciples who refuse to walk away from one another just because times have become difficult. It's the parable of our ministry together in an imperfect place with imperfect people who remain determined and hopeful because they've been miraculously transformed like a seed that has died and yet comes to life, and we can't fully explain—people making a difference because their faith makes a difference in their everyday life. People of prayer who are discerning God's leading and then courageously living in a selfless manner.

Yes, also, people who sacrifice for one another rather than playing it safe, rather than doing what's expedient. Rather than doing what they would determine on their own is best for their loved ones. The hard choice people—people who become living parables of Jesus to one another. People who understand that in this broken and divided world, God is bringing in a holy kingdom, and God is changing all that we would perceive; because more than prayer changing things or changing people, prayer changes the one praying. The one who makes the prayer is the one who risks the most opportunity for change.

Now what does all this mean for us—that Jesus only spoke in parables and that he explained these parables to his disciples in private? Later in the 12th chapter of Mark, Jesus told a would-be disciple—a very unlikely candidate, someone who already had most of the answers— “God is one and we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.” And then I paraphrase, but he continues “and this love must always be connected to how we love our neighbor.”

When this guiding narrative, this parable, becomes our own—becomes the nature of our life—we are very close to the kingdom, Jesus says. May God draw us ever closer to one another, and may we see the kingdom in this place in all its glory.

Amen.