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In today's Gospel, Jesus is going to challenge us with two puzzling parables. He created these early in his ministry to summarize his teachings about the coming of the kingdom of God. The first is not good news for autonomous activists, loner cowboys or determined do-it-yourselfers. This is the only parable in the Gospel of Mark that neither Matthew nor Luke copied into their own Gospels. Apparently, it was unpopular from the get-go.

Jesus' parable about the farmer who gets to sleep late even seems to subvert the first commandment God gave humanity: "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28). This parable tells us that in the kingdom of God, after people scatter the seed, there is nothing more they can or should do until the earth yields the harvest. Any farmers who have survived a few seasons will take issue with that. There's very little that's laid-back about agriculture. Tending the land is a full-time occupation from the day of planting until the harvest has been gathered — and then some. Jesus knew that well.

Jesus also knew that he was called to make present the reign of God but that his preaching in word and deed had quickly won him mortal enemies who had the power to carry out their malevolent intentions. His words were intended to plant seeds and remove weeds. His way of welcoming others, his healing activities, his way of seeking out the poor and outcast were offered like water on thirsty ground. But his work didn't seem to be producing a harvest.

Whether it was his own question about the effect of his efforts or his disciples' impatience for results that led him to weave this parable, it presents a challenging proposal for his disciples throughout time. When we look at it carefully, Jesus was not telling his disciples to sit back and do nothing. But he was telling them that the object of their hope and the results of their work were beyond their control.

Unlike a five-year business plan with regular reviews and measurements of progress, God's grace cannot be plotted out or even harnessed the way a sail captures the wind. Trying to force the growth of grace is as futile as yanking on a plant to make it grow faster or trying to raise ourselves above the ground by pulling up on our own hair. If Jesus' success with the religious authorities of his day is any example, there's not even a sure-fire formula for creating an atmosphere congenial to God's reigning. It's out of our hands.

This leaves committed disciples in the paradoxical position of desiring to do everything possible to bring God and neighbor together, knowing all the while that they are ultimately powerless. Ironically, that is exactly where Jesus wants

his disciples. It puts them where they belong, behind him, following his lead as he trusts in the Father.

That is the message of the second parable — the crazy saying about the mustard seed. Jesus was telling his followers that although they couldn't do anything to establish the kingdom, God had a wildly fruitful plan already in operation. Jesus explained that they couldn't see or understand it but that was because the kingdom of God is as unmanageable and prolific as a weed. All they had to do was trust. To some that is a major problem; to others it is a promise.

The kingdom of God will be a problem to everyone who wants to maintain control — be it of their own spiritual growth, their family, friends, community or the world. On the other hand, the very unruliness of God's reign sounds like a boundless promise of continual surprises to people who realize that even their wildest dreams are paltry compared to what God has in mind.

Perhaps, what Jesus was saying to his disciples with these parables was, "I know what's happening now doesn't look like what you're expecting. That's because you suffer from a congenital disability in the realm of hope. If you will abandon your carefully planned little scenarios and stop clinging to your self-limiting autonomy, you can be really free, and you will get a glimpse of what God is carrying out while your attention has been fixated elsewhere."

One of the greatest challenges the Gospels give us is to drop our expectations so that we can be open to God's possibilities. St. Paul tells us that God's plan is infinitely greater than we can imagine. In the end, trusting God's plan and timetable may ask more of us than all the things we might think we should or could do to make God's kingdom come.

EZEKIEL 17:22-24

Chapters 16-19 of the Book of Ezekiel are full of allegories or parables criticizing Israel's unfaithfulness and reminding the people that the Lord is their only consolation. (Chapter 16, denouncing the people as playing the role of a harlot, is perhaps the raciest chapter in all of Scripture.) The end of Chapter 17 finally proclaims the promise of redemption, comparing Israel to a tree that God will cultivate by taking a graft from a mighty cedar, a tree that can grow to a height of over 100 feet. By the grace of God, little Israel, the tender shoot planted on the mountain heights, will grow prodigiously.

As God's chosen tree puts forth branches and bears fruit, it sounds very much like the virtuous person of Psalm 1 who, like a tree planted near the streams, bears fruit and whose leaves never fade. The image of birds of every kind dwelling beneath it represents Israel's God-given capacity to shelter all peoples.

Somewhat surprisingly in this allegory, all the other trees — the other nations — recognize the grandeur of this one and yet they neither convert nor become the subjects of the mighty and beautiful Israel. Israel's splendor is to serve as a sign and witness, not a source of domination. Thus Israel and the nations both understand what God says: "I, the Lord, bring low the high tree, lift high the lowly tree, wither up the green tree." Everyone who sees these works should recognize the God who is their source. Thus, this reading is decidedly political without promoting oppression. It proclaims the God of Israel as the God of life and the Lord of history. But even as it favors Israel over other nations, it specifies that her role is simply and most importantly to be a sign to others.

In our day, rather than interpret the reading in a nationalistic way, we can let the same message lead us into a reflection on our world's ecological crisis. When we acknowledge God as the source of all life we recognize the wonder of nature as divine revelation ("Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home" #85). Ezekiel's image of the tree, which houses the birds and shades other creatures, reminds us that God intends all of life to flourish in a mutually beneficial way. Following that logic, when we understand the tree as the image of God's chosen people, we will also recognize that being chosen carries with it great responsibility for the rest of creation. Any chosen people, any who understand themselves as God's majestic cedar, should remember that their vocation is to bear fruit and be a shelter to all. We should not forget that this reading ends with a clear warning: I the Lord bring low the high, lift high the low, wither the green and make the withered bloom. Those who allow God to work through them are the peoples who will prosper.

PSALMS 92:2-3, 13-14, 15-16

Psalm 92 constructs a bridge between the first and second readings as it sings in thanksgiving for all God has done. This is the only psalm the Hebrew Psalter designates as a Sabbath psalm. That invites us to pray or sing it in meditative leisure.

When the psalmist speaks of singing at dawn and through the night, that tells us that the prayer may have been part of a vigil service, a communal song in which the congregation celebrated their being together in the presence of their gracious God. Communal thanksgiving deepens our bonds with one another and with God. We might also pray this psalm alone as an antidote to worries that rouse us at dawn or keep us awake through the night. Personalizing this psalm, we can create our own litany of praise for God's goodness, starting with the things for which we wish to give thanks.

When we use our own experience to illustrate the second and third strophes, we will recall the good people we have known, those who have shown us what it means that the just are pillars of strength. This sort of meditation on the psalm leads us to consider what makes some women and men flourish while others lose themselves in petty pursuits. The admirable people we remember in this prayer could be famous heroes, but we might also think of those who have been near to us, mentors who give us the example of a life worth living. Such people are a grace in our lives and pondering their lives opens us to perceive what God wishes to give us through them.

Praying this way at dawn or in the night, or at any other time, is a way to take a sabbatical from our own concerns. Pausing to consider our own blessed circumstances can lead us to pray with new depth as we say, "Lord, it is good to give thanks to you." This prayer helps us to understand what motivates Paul to tell the Corinthians that he lives with hope, no matter what the circumstances of the moment. We sing this prayer in grateful faith because we have seen enough goodness to know that there is much more in store.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:6-10

When children long to grow up, they are not dreaming about adult responsibility, they are expressing their intuition that a grown-up is what a human should be. They think that grownups have arrived. They can drive, they buy and eat whatever they want. Most of all they get to tell children what to do. No matter that grownups might say that shaving can be a chore or that you have to pay for what you buy, the children believe that adults are free from the limits that make them feel little and powerless. It isn't that children want to stop being able to play, or to count on someone to tuck them in, or even to care if they are home on time and eat a good dinner. It's just that they believe there is a lot more out there and they want it.

That's a bit analogous to what Paul is saying to the Corinthians. Like the kid who longs for adulthood he tells them, "While we are at home in the body, we are away from the Lord." He isn't disparaging this life — he calls it home! Still and all, he wants what is to come: to be with the Lord.

Paul tells the Corinthians, "We are always courageous." Lest we put our childhood superhero connotation on that word courageous, it helps to know that the root of the Greek word he used, *tharreo*, means "warm" which indicates that a person is cheerful or confident. Thus the "courage" of which Paul speaks is not heroic bravery but the hope that assures him he can put up with anything now because he knows where he's headed.

Paul returns to this theme over and over, one way and another throughout his letters. His eyes are always on the prize, but he looks forward in a way that also rivets his attention on the importance of the present moment. St. Catherine of Siena seemed to share Paul's atemporal attention span when she said, "All the way to heaven is heaven, because Jesus said, 'I am the way.'" Catherine caught on to the secret of Paul's "courage." The heaven they were headed for can't be found in a geography book. It exists in the quality of relationships shared among people and their God. The atmosphere of God's eternity wafts into the present, transforming it and making those who experience it joyously hungry for more. Theologians call this the already and not yet; Paul speaks of it like homesickness for a place he hasn't yet seen.

Parents can appreciate their children's yearnings to grow up as holy reminders that there is more to come. We are all invited to long for more. Meanwhile, we walk by faith, courageously anxious for the day we will finally see what has been promised.

MARK 4:26-34

Pelagius, a fifth-century monk who was accused of teaching that people didn't need grace to be saved — must have considered this parable highly insulting to dignified "self-actualizers" like himself. (Those psychological terms weren't part of his Latin vocabulary, but that doesn't mean that he didn't understand the attitude.) Problems with this teaching of

Jesus neither started nor stopped with Pelagius and friends.

The problem with this parable is that it assaults our egoism, a bloated distorted sense of self-worth that closes our eyes to the fact that everything we have and are is a gift of God. According to the Italian Jesuit Scripture scholar Silvano Fausti, this parable reflects Jesus' own understanding that while his message and ministry, even the very reign of God he preached, seemed to be headed to the tomb, he knew that God was at work in ways he did not understand. He had planted the seeds he had been given. The rest was up to his Father. According to Jesus, the growth of the reign of God is as imperceptible as the hidden development of a seed in the ground. Fausti says that belief in this truth is an expression of genuine monotheism, implying that when we stop thinking of ourselves as gods, we will trust that only God can bring about the kingdom. We may plant seeds but we must resist the temptation to think we know how to make them grow.

Jesus follows this parable with one about a mustard seed. Just when disciples might feel that nothing is happening, that they have fallen for the impossible dream, Jesus promises that God's reign is not only mysterious and beyond human control, but as prodigious as a weed. The Hebrew Scriptures never talk about a mustard seed, which suggests that Jesus may have been reinterpreting something like the parable of today's first reading. The reading from Ezekiel 17 compared the chosen people to a shoot taken from the greatest of foreign trees and replanted by God in Israel. Seeing the kingdom of God start as a mustard seed is a far humbler image. Nevertheless, the minuscule mustard seed's growth is astounding or, as farmers would tell you, uncontrollable.

In the end, both of today's parables point out that establishing the kingdom is God's work beyond our control and our comprehension. Three of our readings tell us that our major task is to trust God. The closer we get to mastering that task, the more we will understand what to do about the rest.

Planning: 11th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

Today is Father's Day in at least 60 countries, including the U.S. and Canada. That calls for a petition or two in the General Intercessions and a blessing at the end of the Mass. The Book of Blessings offers several petitions and a blessing formula (#1732-33).

Ordinarily, that's about as much as I would suggest for acknowledging fathers on this day. The readings this Sunday, however, might suggest a more comprehensive look at fatherhood.

Today's readings call our attention to various aspects of the natural world, which many of us experience more fully in summer activities. The first reading speaks of God planting and nurturing a cedar on a high mountain. The tree will become a home for birds of all kinds. The responsorial psalm describes the just as like a palm tree or a cedar of Lebanon. In the Gospel, Jesus tells two parables that depend on nature imagery: the farmer planting grain and the mustard seed growing into a large plant that also serves as a home for birds.

As I write this column, countless trees in California are being destroyed by wildfires, a disaster presumably exacerbated by the effects of climate change. And around the world, farmers struggle to feed their families and others in the face of increasing droughts, floods and high temperatures that are disrupting the food production system. Yet our leaders refuse to deal with the current and projected disasters, which disproportionately affect the poor but are increasingly affecting all by increased costs for food, insurance, etc.

Pope Francis has not stopped calling our attention to the moral demand to address climate change. His encyclical "Laudato Si", on Care for Our Common Home" stands as one of the most comprehensive treatments of the matter and provides a spiritual context for the moral issues it raises.

We call God our Father, and like every good father, God cares about the children of the world. A cogent reason for any father to be concerned about climate change is that the worst effects will fall on our children and grandchildren. If we have any love for our progeny, we ought to be doing all in our power to address the dangers ahead, even if that will cost

us some pleasure or wealth in the short term.

Could preachers and planners connect fatherhood and care for creation? Preachers and planners alike can find helpful resources at the website of the Catholic Climate Covenant (www.catholicclimatecovenant.org/resources). We need to keep addressing this critical moral issue again and again until people take it seriously and take the steps needed to avert the disasters that scientists warn us will come if we do nothing. At the very least include petitions in the General Intercessions on a regular basis.

Prayers: 11th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

For those of us struggling to make our way through life toward the fullness of the reign of God, perspective is everything. Stories from the past, and faith and hope in the future, help us to live in the present. It has always been this way for God's people. Like them, "we walk by faith, and not by sight." Though we cannot see the future, it is enough. We continue to plant our seeds, make our plans, and move forward toward the harvest.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, You compared God's reign to a small planted seed: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, You promised that the seed would grow and flourish: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, You invite us to trust that God's reign will be brought to fruition: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray now for a world awaiting the fruitful reign of God.

Minister For the church: That it may manifest patience and hope throughout the world for the fullness of God's peace and justice ... we pray,

- For those who continue to live in exile from family or country; and for all who have lost hope in the future ... we pray,
- For those whose faith needs nurturing; and for those who support them through prayer, teaching, encouragement or understanding ... we pray,
- For gardeners, farmers, teachers, counselors, artists and all whose work involves trusting in future outcomes ... we pray,
- For a spirit of sacrifice and courage as we accept our role in caring for the Earth that God the Father gifted to humanity at the creation of all good things ...we pray,
- For all fathers and stepfathers; grandfathers and godfathers; for all men who serve and nurture young people, for their strength and tenderness, courage and wisdom, generosity and faithfulness ... we pray,
- For couples in this parish preparing for marriage; and for all who are waiting for healing, employment, or any kind of help or resolution ... we pray,

Presider God who brings all to fruition, we live in a time of planting, waiting, believing and hoping. Give us the courage to move toward the future, even when we are unsure of the outcome. We ask this in the name of your Son, Jesus. Amen.

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