

## **Umbrella Faith**

June 17, 2012

Mark 4:26-34

One summer, a drought threatened the crop in a small town. On a hot and dry Sunday, the village parson told his congregation, "There isn't anything that will save us except to pray for rain. Go home, pray, believe, and come back next Sunday ready to thank God for sending rain."

The people did as they were told and returned to church the following Sunday. But as soon as the parson saw them, he was furious. "We can't worship today. You do not yet believe," he said.

"But," they protested, "we prayed, and we do believe." "Believe?" he responded. "Then where are your umbrellas?"

"Where are your umbrellas?" The parson was reminding the people that their faith needed to be seen in some action. "Where are your umbrellas".

Our gospel lesson this morning speaks about that kind of faith and trust in God. Umbrella faith. Jesus is speaking about the kingdom of God and how that kingdom grows. It grows with faith, an unwavering faith, a faith that we cannot see or understand.

The first parable in our gospel lesson this morning deals with the kingdom of God in a way that people in a rural area could understand. Certainly the people of Jesus' time and place would have readily grasped the analogy.

Jesus tells a story about a farmer who goes out and plants his seeds. Then instead of worrying about those seeds, he lets nature take its course. And lo and behold, the seeds grow. first the blade, then the ear then the full grain.

Then the farmer goes out and harvests his crop. Notice the words of the text - "night and day, while he's asleep or awake." Jesus wants to make it clear that the farmer didn't do anything to the seed, but rather he trusted in the natural order of things. He did that because he knew he could do nothing to help the seed grow.

I think most agricultural people understand that. No matter how much they worry about a crop, how much they pace the floor, how much they complain about the wet weather, or the dry weather, they really can't do anything about those things.

Oh sure, they might irrigate, or fertilize or things like that, depending on the crop. But in the end, they know that they are dependent on the natural order of things for the final outcome.

I mean, can you imagine a farmer going out in his field, stand there and yell at his crops, "Come on, grow! I command you to grow. I demand that you produce a bountiful harvest."

We see the absurdity in that. After the farmer has done all he can do, the rest is up to nature, to the natural order.

Clearly, there is a lesson here for us. Sometimes it is very difficult for us to surrender to the natural order. Sometimes we cannot let go, sometimes we get so caught up in trying to help the natural order that life become miserable for us.

We become a grouch and others tend to avoid us. But, if we do our job of planting the seed right, the seed will do its job and eventually the harvest will be there.

Jesus is comparing the kingdom of God to this idea of a natural order in the growing of crops and the harvest.

He is saying that just as we need to surrender to the natural order in growing crops, in the Kingdom of God we need to surrender to the reign or rule of God in that kingdom.

The kingdom of God for Jesus was not a place on this earth. It was not a territorial kingdom with geographical boundaries.

Jesus made it clear on many occasions that the kingdom he's talking about, the Kingdom of God, is within each of us. The kingdom of God is God's rule, God's reign on this earth.

Jesus is saying that God rules his Kingdom by reigning in us and through us. God reigns not us.

Every Sunday in our worship we pray what we call the Lord's Prayer, and no doubt you do so in your personal prayer life as well. The Lord's Prayer, if we are not careful, is one of those things that can lose it's effective meaning through sheer rote and repetition. That's another topic for another sermon.

But think about what we pray in that prayer. After acknowledging the sacredness and holiness of the name of God - which, by the way is also another topic for another sermon. I am deeply troubled by the casual way we throw around the name of God these days. I sometimes think if I hear someone say "Oh My God" one more time, or use the name of God the way it's said today, I'll.....

Well, I'm digressing. After acknowledging the sacredness and holiness of the name of God, what do we pray? "Your Kingdom come.....on earth." Then we conclude by confessing to God that his is the Kingdom, the power, and the glory.

We must acknowledge, "God, the Kingdom is yours," and build upon that solid fact. The kingdom of God comes of itself. We don't bring God's kingdom, God does. The kingdom of God is not the product of human effort. God brings his plan to fruition in his own way.

Now, we certainly believe that God wants to work through his people, and will if we allow him to use us. But we can't go around calling our own shots, doing what happens to strike our own fancy.

Our activity becomes constructive only when we allow God to take full charge and surrender to his purpose.

We don't rule, God does. The true Kingdom is God's, not something of our own making.

What you and I are called to have is faith, faith that God is the ruler of his kingdom, faith that God is working even when we cannot see him, even when we have lost sight of him, even when we see no answer from him, we must believe that he is still ruling, he is still in charge.

Umbrella faith. Faith that believes God is in control.

A pastor tells this story: A young woman in his parish was going through a serious crisis in her life., It was extremely difficult for her to do what she had to do, and the pastor assured her that God would help her through her time of trial and instantly she retorted almost in a sneer:

"Look Pastor, you know I've been a good church member, but the first time I really need God, he's nowhere around. I've prayed and I got no answer. I asked for help, nothing.

So I know what I'm going to do, I'm going to have to do by myself. In all of this, I don't even know whether God exists. I've searched, but I can't find him."

I'm sure some of us can tell the same the story or something similar, or we know someone who can. Many of us have at times wondered if God is really real. We wonder if he is active in his kingdom, whether he is working or just leaving us to our own ends.

Yet, it is many times in these dark hours that we come to a vital, lasting relationship with God. When we thought we had lost him in the pain and frustration of life, it is in those very kinds of circumstances that we end up finding God.

In his book, *Out of the Whirlwind*, Mark Tabb writes, "He tells us to trust him enough to believe he knows what he is doing. When his actions don't make sense, trust him. When the windows of heaven seem to be open extra wide and life can't get any better, trust him.

"When the bottom falls out and life turns hard, trust him. Good times and bad, happy and sad, trust him. When I try to explain him away or reduce him to neat little formulas, I show a lack of faith, not a wealth of it."

What will God do? I have no idea. God is full of surprises. But one thing I do know: God isn't making things up on the fly. He knows what he is doing.

You and I must have faith enough to entrust our entire life to him, even when we feel we would rather not.

Umbrella faith!

There is a second parable in today's Gospel lesson. In it, Jesus compares God's kingdom to a mustard seed.

He says the Kingdom is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown on the ground, is very, very small. But it becomes the largest of all garden plants; it grows long branches and birds can make nests in its shade.

Jesus is saying that though God's kingdom started out small with just 12 disciples, it will grow and become very large. God's rule on this earth began small but will grow.

We must have umbrella faith!

For those of you who like numbers, here's something I think you'll find interesting. A gardener, prompted by curiosity, once counted the seed pods on a medium-sized mustard plant. There were 85.

The average number of seeds in each pod was eight. Since two crops in a given year could be matured, the gardener figured that it was possible in the interim between February and mid-October to produce a yield of 462,000 seeds, all from one original plant.

If the seed of a mustard plant can produce that kind of result, IMAGINE what the Spiritual seed that God gives us can do!

We must have faith that God is working in His kingdom.

It is like the safety net in the following:

When the Golden Gate bridge was being built in San Francisco, a number of workers lost their lives by falling from precariously high positions. As a result, the work proceeded slowly until someone hit on the idea of building a net under the construction area so that when a workman fell, he would not fall to his death but would be caught by the net.

A giant safety net was developed at a cost of \$100,000 - maybe not pocket change even now, but a lot more money in 1937 than it is today.. This was the first time something like this was used at a construction site.

With the security of the net below them, men were able to move about at a faster pace because they knew that if they fell their lives would be spared. With the security of the net below them, they could work without the dread of uncertainty.

We may not be able to see the net below us, but it's there. Our security comes from a loving, all-powerful God who protects us every step of the way.

God is working in His kingdom. We have a sense of security in this life that God is alive and well.

The kingdom of God is like a seed planted in the ground it grows of its own accord. The kingdom of God is having umbrella faith - faith that God is alive and well.

A little over 75 years ago a little known American inventor, born of Russian descent named Vladimir Kosma Zworykin began to work for the Westinghouse Electric Corporation. Mr. Zworykin brought with him a concept that he had been formulating in his mind.

Over the next few years at Westinghouse, Mr. Zworykin worked on an idea called an iconoscope and a kinescope.

The kinescope would eventually come to be known as the Cathode Ray Tube, and in 1929 Mr. Zworykin revealed his great invention to the whole world in a much publicized demonstration. The iconoscope became the TV Camera for broadcasting and the Cathode Ray Tube became our TV Receiver.

All of this came about because of the small seed of an idea in the mind of one man. Now, because of that idea, we all sit and watch "in the branches" of the "tree" that grew from that small mustard seed. As you can see, from the small seed of an idea great things can grow. And so it is with your faith in God and with the presence of the Kingdom of God within your heart.

Billy Graham once noted, "Faith is the avenue of salvation. Not intellectual understanding. Not money. Not your works. Just simple faith. How much faith? The faith of a mustard seed, so small you can hardly see it.

But if you will put that little faith in the person of Jesus, your life will be changed. He will come with supernatural power into your heart. It can happen to you."

May it happen to each of us is my prayer!