

## **“Wherever the Wind May Blow”**

**Mark 4: 26-34**

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Since May 6 of 2004, I have been waiting for this specific moment. Not this one here today, where I’m preaching, but something else. I didn’t think this moment in time would ever happen again, especially with the way things ended. I just didn’t think it was possible to recapture the story, the comedic magic, the complex and intertwined relationships that would hold me captive for the majority of my life. “What in the world happened on May 6, 2004?” you might ask. Well, that’s when the final episode of the greatest sitcom of all time aired — “Friends.” Last weekend, for the first time in 17 years, the cast of Friends reunited in an HBO special titled “The One Where They Get Back Together.”

It was everything I hoped it would be. I cackled with laughter as they recapped the scene where Ross is moving a couch up three flights of steps, and yells “pivot” a few too many times. I cried as they hugged each other for the first time in years, watching them walking around this perfectly recreated set. And like the rest of the world, I sat in absolute shock as we all learned that Jennifer Aniston and David Schwimmer indeed had a crush on each other, which is why the love story of Ross and Rachel was so very believable. One of my favorite moments of the show is the episode where Phoebe, Ross, and Rachel are sitting around Monica’s kitchen table, discussing the most romantic songs of all time. Rachel argues that it has to be the song “The Way We Were,” and Phoebe chimes in with “I think the one Elton John wrote for that guy on ‘Who’s the Boss.’” They’re confused and then she sings “Hold me close, young Tony Danza.” This is of course referring to Elton John’s hit “Tiny Dancer.” Not Tony Danza.

Whenever I read a parable, I feel like it’s a well-known song where I’ve been singing the tune and thinking I’ve got all the words figured out, until, like Phoebe, I’m singing it in front of friends around a kitchen table and someone says, “Wait, what did you just say? Those aren’t the words!”

Jesus parables continue to spark imagination and controversy alike. These stories speak around things, not directly about them. So we are left to wonder and collectively scratch our heads discerning the meaning. And some among us attempt an interpretation of them, and when we are honest, we know it falls short of the truth.

So I feel that I must echo the thoughts of N.T. Wright, who, at the start of his book *The New Testament and the People of God* wrote that he knew that much of what he was about to say in his book was either wrong or flawed in some way that he did not recognize. The problem was that he didn't know which parts those were or he would correct them so he was counting on the readers to set him straight. I'm confident that you will also set me straight, for I trust the same is true of me, or anyone who pretends to know what these parables of Jesus are really about. I'm going to attempt just that today.

In our gospel reading from Mark, chapter 4, a familiar, recognizable parable, we hear Jesus doing his favorite thing — speaking about the kingdom of God through riddle and paradox and mystery and humor and charm. We see this a lot throughout the gospels, someone asks Jesus a question, and instead of answering it with a black and white, straightforward response, he says “Pull up a chair and let me tell you a story.”

The kingdom is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into three measures of flour until all of it was leavened. The kingdom is like a treasure buried in a field; the man who discovers it sells everything he owns to buy the field, for what does he have to lose? The kingdom of God is like the wheat growing in the midst of the weeds, the net catching tons of fish, a pearl germinating in a shell. The kingdom is present yet hidden — imminent yet transcendent, here and now, and not quite yet. This kingdom advances not through power and might, but through mercy, grace, kindness, and humility. Children usually get the kingdom of God, but the rich never do. The kingdom belongs to the peacemakers, the merciful, the poor, the meek. The first will be last, and the last will be first.

There is nothing Jesus talked about more than the kingdom. And in today's reading from Mark, we hear the kingdom of God described in two parables — as a sower that was sowing a seed, and as a tiny mustard seed, the smallest of all the seeds on earth, that when sown into the ground becomes the greatest of all the shrubs.

Since the beginning of COVID, my Facebook feed has been filled with articles upon articles about how the Church will not survive this pandemic. I'm in a Wake Forest Divinity School cohort for this year called "Thriving in Ministry," and each month, we have Zoom sessions where we learn about different topics related to leadership. Last month, we were hearing a presentation on the post-pandemic church, and our presenter said that early predictions from researchers that look at church trends across the globe are saying that we should expect 30% of our congregation to not come back to church. We've lost 30% of our people.

If that statistic is a bit shocking to you, then you're right where I was when I heard that data. There are articles upon articles filled with facts about why millennials are leaving the church, the rise of the "nones" who have no religious affiliation at all, the steep decline in worship, how people would rather attend virtually after a year of couch worship and they just don't find the community as necessary anymore, the doom and gloom goes on and on. Now I know too many people that are totally disillusioned with Christianity and church, and Baptist life, I've heard too many stories of people feeling like they aren't welcome and they don't belong, so I don't exactly dispute these claims.

But I do wonder about our response to hearing such statistics. I think the first gut-reaction of anyone in church anywhere, is to say, we've got to do something radical. It is not enough to scatter the seed, we've got to genetically alter the seed so it grows in any weather, with any amount of sunlight, in any storm. We've got to make sure it's producing more, so it's healthier and resilient and hearty to stand up in today's society. Perhaps we need a little more glitz and glamor and prosperity to jazz up this gospel message about the kingdom. We don't need to just change the seed, maybe we need to change the soil that the seed grows in. To be sure the Kingdom can't grow with liturgies that are thousands of years old! We aren't doing enough, we aren't reaching

enough people, we don't have enough visitors, we need to be doing everything a little bit better than the church down the street.

We live in a society that is always teaching us that there is no better virtue than achievement and success. It is the greatest temptation to let that rugged American value leak into the church and lead all of our practices like the very Kingdom of God depends on our efforts. I will confess to you that I have struggled with this passage for weeks, Jesus is stepping on all ten of my toes here. I have said more times than I can count that God depends on us to bring about the work of the Kingdom. God depends on our hands and our feet, and our efforts. For better or for worse, my personality drives my ambitious, action-oriented self and for much of my life I have unfortunately functioned like I'm some kind of self-sufficient hero in a young adult novel. But over and over again, when I have read this passage I kept coming back to the question — do you not trust the seed to grow? Now don't hear me wrong. I am not saying that we throw up our hands and say, "God if you want the Kingdom to grow, you've got to just get to it, make it happen." We are still the hands and feet of Christ, so we have a huge part in cultivating love and peace, justice, growing this Kingdom here on earth. We throw out the seed, after all. But this parable shatters the illusion that we hold the fate of the kingdom in our hands. The passage says, "the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how." He doesn't know how because all he did was throw it, and then he went to sleep. It's not all up to us, thank God.

Martin Luther, a German professor of theology, a priest, Augustinian monk, author and composer, that pioneered the Reformation of the church, said "After I preach my sermon on Sunday, when I return home, I drink my little glass of Wittenberg beer and I just let the gospel run its course." Luther said that after he pounded on the pulpit and expounded the gospel, he would go home and pull out the Sunday newspaper, and pull out his glass of warm Wittenberg beer and start to drink it and enjoy the afternoon. Luther knew that the power of his sermon was not based on the power of his theological excellence or eloquence or frankly any of his abilities. He knew that the power of the sermon would have no effect whatsoever unless the very Word of God

got into a person's heart. Luther knew that he couldn't do that — that was the work of the Spirit.

If we expand this beyond the walls of our church, we'll realize that this seed we're throwing around cannot be controlled or contained. And yet, every single seed matters. I was recently on a Zoom call with some other female pastors, and we were talking about our calls to the ministry and the biggest influences in our lives. Do you know what we all said? Each of us talked about the lay people in our churches growing up. The people that handed us finger cookies and red Kool-aid at VBS. The faithful women that taught us Sunday School, and the man that drove our church bus to Alabama for the youth mission trip. The youth parent that let me cry on her shoulder when I didn't make the softball team. The older man that always had a Werther's original to hand us on Sunday morning. The saints of the church. Every seed matters, and we have no idea the impact that simple, sometimes mindless acts of love and kindness have.

Noel Shoonmaker tells a story about some inner-city gangs were warring against each other in two particular housing projects. There was an elementary school that was located between the two projects, and one day during some gang activity some school children were tragically shot and killed in the crossfire. After the tragic shooting, the gunfire continued and kids were afraid to go to school. School attendance dropped to 20%. The city's politicians were refusing to help with this problem in the projects, so a local church decided to do something about it. Volunteers from the nearby church became "walking school buses" for the children. They got children from their homes each morning and walked them to school, shielding them the whole way there, protecting them with their own bodies. These church folks were willing to take a bullet so children they didn't know could get an education. Their efforts were so effective that the school's attendance rate gradually rose from 20% to 98%. Did the walking school buses put an end to all gang violence in America? No. But the Mustard Seed Kingdom showed up.

In Henri Nouwen's book *The Life of the Beloved*, he writes "How different our life would be if we could but believe that every little act of faithfulness, every gesture of love, every word of forgiveness, every

little bit of joy and peace will multiply and multiply...Imagine your kindness to your friends and your generosity to the poor are little mustard seeds that will become strong trees in which many birds can build their nests...Imagine that you're trusting that every little movement of love you make will ripple out into ever new and wider circles...You and I would dance for joy were we to know that we, little people, are chosen, blessed, and broken to become the bread that will multiply itself in the giving."

This brings us back to that tiny mustard seed. The smallest of all seeds on Earth. It is incredibly fascinating that Jesus would use this specific seed — have you ever heard of someone wanting a mustard tree? After doing some more research on the mustard seed in the ancient Near East, not many people wanted to plant this type of seed because it was very hard to control. Once it gets into the ground, it spreads and takes over entire plots of land. Jesus' comparison would be akin to saying the Kingdom of God is like a dandelion. We try to contain dandelions, perhaps get rid of them, but they just keep growing and spreading, showing up in the most unwanted and unexpected places. That seed would grow to be the fullest, greatest of all shrubs. That shrub is big enough for birds of every kind to find a home: Jew and Gentile, male and female, black and white, Latino and Korean, gay and straight, Republican and Democrat and Independent, rich and poor and middle class, introvert and extrovert and ambiverts. Birds of every feather can flock together because this shrub, this Kingdom, this Gospel, this God, is big enough.