

Automatic Kingdom

Mark 4: 27-29

He also said, “The kingdom of God is like if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

The Kingdom of God is like.... How many times do we hear Jesus saying the introductory phrase? The kingdom of God is like... As if the closest we are going to be able to get to an understanding of what God’s kingdom is, is by claiming that it is like something else. The Kingdom of God is like...

All you need to do is live in the South for a little while and you understand how this metaphorical phraseology works. While northerners might say, “Life is so unpredictable,” here we turn a simple statement into a metaphor by saying something like, “Life is *like* a box of chocolates.” Or rather than, “I have a nasty cut,” we hear, “I’m bleeding *like* a stuck pig.” Or rather than, “I’m feeling really antsy” it is, “I’m *like* a cat on a hot-tin roof.” “The Kingdom of God is like,” says Jesus. Now I get it: Jesus must be from the South!

Why doesn’t Jesus just tell us where the kingdom is? Why doesn’t he just come out and say, “The kingdom of God *is* at the food pantry where hungry families are being fed,” or “The kingdom of God *is* happening when a predominantly black church and a predominantly white church gather together for an outdoor worship service?” Or “The kingdom of God *is* where a group of people stand against the immigration policies that are separating families at our borders.” Instead he offers these nonsensical parables about the kingdom being *like* a foolish farmer who sows seed on asphalt, or a shepherd who puts ninety-nine sheep in jeopardy just so he can go after the missing one. Often his teachings are so perplexing that his listeners end up going home wondering, “Did you know what the preacher was talking about in the sermon today?” Sometimes it seems like Jesus was just having some fun with his audience by pointing out random ordinary objects and saying the kingdom is *like* them: a sower, a seed, a net, some yeast, a coin, a merchant, a woman, a man. And then he pulls out of his hat some powerful point or hidden meaning, always using a metaphor to describe what the kingdom of God is *like*.

But today’s parable is not so exciting. The kingdom of God is like someone who scatters seed somewhere, then forgets about it. They just keep going on with their life as the days go by. Meanwhile, the seeds sprout, growing stalks, until finally there is a head with some grain to be harvested. That’s it! There is nothing profound going on in this parable folks. Ask a farmer or a gardener and they will probably tell you that it is about as interesting of a story as reading your fifth-grade earth science book. There aren’t any twists or turns or shocking upside-down endings to be found here. It’s just a day in the life of a plant: from seed to stalk, to head, to grain. It’s as boring as Jesus’ parables come. I actually forgot it was in the bible.

Except when we dig a little deeper we discover the Greek word used to describe the ordinary earth producing event is *automate*. It is automatic. The kingdom is like something that is automatic. Like how geese fly in a "V" southbound in the winter. Or how our children are born with built in honing device which finds the most dangerous object in the room. It's automatic. Or how if we don't keep up with our yard, those helicopter seeds will spin on the breeze landing in our yard, producing a few dozen volunteer trees on their own. It's automatic. The other day when we were out in the front yard, we discovered that our two-year old peach tree had produced its first peach. It looked as ripe as a sunset, so we plucked it and cut it into slices for the family to taste. To my surprise it was a pretty darn good peach. For a moment I was thinking that this is a special thing. But if the peach tree could talk it would probably say, "Now Jon, I'm a peach tree! I'm just doing what I've been created to do." It's automatic. Little by little. Step by step. Day by day. Inside the automatic rhythms of life's ordinary progressions: from seed to stalk to head to grain. The kingdom of God is like something that is automatic; it is just doing what it was created to do.

Yet, every once in a while, God takes the ordinary seeds of the everyday stuff and does something extraordinary with it. Like the student who had made the decision to drop out of school after his junior year in high school. Except on the last day of class his teacher said to him, "I'm excited to see in what ways you are going to use your education to help change our world!" Her words were like a seed that got sown inside of him. After graduating college, he says it was the moment which changed his path. An ordinary word, becoming extraordinary. Or have you ever experienced singing the same old hymn you've sung a million times, but because of something you are going through in life, there is a word that pops out and it gets lodged in the throat? And the ordinary words, suddenly seem as if God is saying something directly to you. And it's extraordinary.

Of course, the extraordinary part isn't up to us. All we can do is keep tossing seeds of hope, love, peace and justice into the fields of life's ordinary landscapes. But every once in a while, we watch as the rhythms of God's automatic kingdom takes these seeds and produces an extraordinary harvest.

Imagine if you will a church in the middle of their worship service. They are singing a hymn just before they are about to celebrate communion. As they are singing the final verse, a homeless family walks through the front door with their dog. They head down the center aisle carrying stuffed backpacks as the children roll their suitcases behind them. Their hair is disheveled, their faces look weary. The children look like they have not bathed in a couple of weeks and the dog seems to have fleas. "What in the world?" everyone is wondering.

"Excuse me," says the father, "I'm sorry for interrupting. But we could hear you singing from the sidewalk as we were walking by. We almost just kept on walking, but for some reason the song sounded like God telling us it was okay to come in. You see, we are tired and scared. We haven't had anything to eat in two days. I see on your table you have some bread. I see over there is a bowl of water. Please, could we use the bowl of water to wash up and may we have some of the bread?"

Well at this point the church is sitting in their seats frozen. But then all of a sudden, a deacon stands up, grabs the baptismal font and holds it in front of the family as they wash. Then an elder comes forward, grabs the loaf of bread and breaks it, offering large chunks to the parents and children. Everyone watches as they begin stuffing their faces. They watch as the dog's tail wags as it eats up whatever crumbs have fallen onto the ground. Then another person comes forward and grabs the cup giving it to the children who are guzzling the grape juice as the purple runs down their faces, onto their clothes, dripping over the carpet beneath them. And then, without saying a single word, a few more people get up and grab the offering plates, zig-zagging the plates down the pews taking up whatever cash they have and bringing it before the family. Then the piano player gets up, sits down at the piano and just starts playing:

*“Together we serve, united by love,
inviting God’s world to the glorious feast.
We work and we pray through sorrow and joy,
extending God’s love to the last and the least.”*

The whole congregation joins in the music, singing the remarkable words that on most Sundays were ordinary. But today they are extraordinary. The kingdom of God is like a church whose lives and hearts are so firmly rooted in the soil of the gospel, that as the family walks out the father stops and yells, “Thank you, this is an extraordinary church!” And you know what: perhaps it is. Or perhaps it is God's ordinary kingdom people being automatic; simply doing what they are created to do.