

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – June 17, 2018

[Mark 4:26-34](#) & [2nd Corinthians 5:16-17](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Read the provided commentary below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Mark 4:26-34 (From the *Homiletics* archive; “Hope in a Seed”, June 14, 2015)

Before resuming the narration of Jesus' miracles (cf. Mark 3:7-12; 4:35ff.), Mark offers the following summary: "With many such parables he [i.e., Jesus] spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples" (vv. 33-34). Based on Mark's depiction of, and Jesus' reason for, using parables, the final phrase that he "explained everything in private" should resonate deeply with readers of this journal since one of its goals is to explain what the Scriptures mean, and, specifically in this instance, the significance of two parables.

Moreover, given the likelihood that most of the time church leaders address disciples, Jesus' practice continues to be an apt model for pastors, priests, ministers and teachers, namely, to explain and amplify the parables for believers. This endeavor, however, is much easier to assert than actually to achieve. Even Jesus' disciples struggled to make sense of his parables, despite being part of the inner circle and having the privilege of listening to him in private (cf. Mark 4:13; 6:52; 8:17, 21).

Although the lectionary reading begins in verse 26 and includes the parables of the scattered seed (vv. 26-29) and the mustard seed (vv. 30-32), Mark's précis actually refers to all four parables found in chapter 4. (Incidentally, prior to this point in Mark, there are only a few recorded occasions when Jesus employed parables in his teaching [cf. 2:18-22; 4:23-27].) The first parable -- "The Parable of the Sower" -- is clearly an allegory, the longest of the four, and perhaps the most renowned gospel parable. It is also the one that receives the most detailed explanation (4:1-20). The second parable, "A lamp under a bushel basket," is another familiar figure of speech, since the imagery and its associated teachings appear regularly in the synoptic gospels (vv. 21-25; cf. Matthew 5:15; 7:2; 10:26; 13:12; 25:29; Luke 6:38; 8:16-18; 11:33; 12:2; 19:26). While the parables become progressively shorter, the third and fourth parables, "The parable of the growing [scattered] seed" and "The parable of the mustard seed," call attention to the theme of judgment, a common thread in all four parables.

Despite the similarity just mentioned, one feature that sets the third and fourth parables apart is the inclusion of the expression "the kingdom of God" (vv. 26, 30). (While Jesus refers to "the kingdom of God" in verse 11, the phrase is absent in the parable of the sower.) Consequently, it is vital to emphasize that the parables of the scattered seed and mustard seed highlight the power of God's kingdom. Another notable detail is that the parable of the scattered seed is unique to Mark. Given this, there is no need to explore the other gospels, since neither Matthew nor Luke nor John provide an interpretative insight inadvertently omitted by Mark. It's also worth mentioning that Mark is botanically correct when he refers to the mustard plant as a "shrub" (both Matthew and Luke erroneously assert --

perhaps exaggerating for emphasis -- that "it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree," and "it grew and became a tree" [Matthew 13:32; Luke 13:19, respectively]). Finally, while the first two parables in Mark 4 include an explanation or application of the story (cf. Mark 4:14-20; 22-25), the last two parables do not overtly share this feature. Rather than offer an explicit explanation or practical application, these parables are obtuse, which makes interpretation challenging.

As many scholars have suggested, the parable of the scattered seed underscores God's agency. "The kingdom of God is as 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," asserts Jesus (vv. 26-27). The portrayal of this farmer is not that of an attentive caretaker (cf. Isaiah 5:1-7). On the contrary, except for the initial scattering of the seed, this anonymous horticulturalist is entirely passive. No additional cultivation occurs so when the seed sprouts and grows, the seed's transformation is an utter mystery to this laissez-faire farmer. Lacking a lucid account for the dynamic process by which the seed becomes a plant, the narrator offers this generic observation: "The earth produces of itself [αυτοματη γη καρποφορει], first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head" (v. 28). Of particular note is the term αυτοματη, "automatically," which further accentuates the farmer's inert role.

The tranquil pace of the parable shifts unexpectedly in verse 29 when the quiescent farmer picks up a sickle, and at once begins to harvest the ripe grain. For readers in agrarian cultures, the abrupt transition is understandable -- there can be no delay when crops mature, they must be harvested immediately. Even so, the sudden transition from inaction to action by the farmer is disrupting, and calls attention to some sort of imminent judgment. Similarly, Joachim Jeremias suggests that this parable entails not only the "unwavering assurance that God's hour approaches" but also patient waiting (*The Parables of Jesus* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963], 151-53).

Like the parable of a lamp under a bushel basket, the parable of the mustard seed begins with a question: "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?" (v. 30; cf. v. 21). Obviously, it would have been helpful if Mark had included at least some of the answers that Jesus' disciples or the crowd offered, but there is no reason to believe that they even replied to Jesus' query. The desire to fill in the gaps reflects a contemporary perspective rather than carefully reading the gospels as written -- oftentimes clumsy and laconic documents.

In light of the preceding, the focus remains on Jesus' answer. His depiction of the tiny mustard seed that becomes "the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade" is credible despite the fact that the mustard seed isn't the smallest of all seeds (v. 32). Clearly, one facet of the parable is that God's kingdom cannot be measured by its small beginning. Stated differently, the infinitesimal will become the infinite, which is happening right before the ancients' eyes, although perhaps imperceptibly at first.

Along a similar line of thought, C. H. Dodd proposes that "the parables of growth ... are not to be taken as implying a long process of development introduced by the ministry of Jesus and to be consummated by his second advent, although the Church understood them in that sense. As in the teaching of Jesus as a whole, so here, there is no long historical perspective: the *eschaton*, the divinely ordained climax of history, is here" (*The Parables of the Kingdom* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961], 155-56). In addition, Bernard Brandon Scott suggests that the violation of the law of diverse kinds provides a backdrop for the parable of the mustard seed (*Hear Then the Parable* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990], 381-83, 386).

To be sure, those who cherish certainty and abhor interpretive imprecision might find these parables unsettling. However, this same vagueness presents an opportunity to probe a text more deeply, perhaps by means of *lectio divina*, which can peel away layers of meaning through each subsequent reading.

Commentary on 2nd Corinthians 5:6-10, (11-13), 14-17

(From the *Homiletics* archive; “Hotel Heaven” – June 18, 2006)

Underlying Paul’s discussion of the body in 2 Corinthians 5:6-17 is his confidence in Christ’s coming. It is this hope that enables him to endure repeated hardships, and this certainty of future resurrection propels him to continue his mission with boldness. Though he is facing opposition from some in the Corinthian community, the apostle does not shy away from revealing the persecution that has accompanied his preaching of the gospel and uses the severity of his affliction to exemplify the sincerity of his motives to bring the Corinthians life in Christ.

Paul’s statements in 2 Corinthians 5:6, 8 have been used in a variety of ways in church tradition to denigrate the body. Surely, taken out of context, a statement such as “we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord” in verse 8 sounds much like Paul disparaging the body. The passage, however, is one full of hope — hope that, if something should happen to this “earthly tent” in the preaching of the gospel, then there is assurance that “we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (5:1). Since life in this physical body is far from easy, Paul rejoices that God has provided his Spirit as a guarantee that our mortality will eventually be swallowed up by life (5:2-5).

It is with this assurance that Paul can say in 5:6: “So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord.” All of the present hardships “in the body” are evidence of Paul’s mission to carry around the “death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies” (4:10). Paul knows that as long as he is still awaiting Jesus’ return he must continue his perilous task to rescue others from death in order to guide them to life in Christ (4:11-12). He lives in the “meantime” — the tension of longing for Christ’s return and the duty of sharing this good news with others. As long as he is in this earthly body, this jar of clay (4:7), then he will continue to bear witness to the gospel even when afflicted in every way (4:8). Why does Paul continue to preach at the risk of losing his own life? (1:8-11; 4:7-15; 11:23-33). The apostle himself answers this question in 4:15: “Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.” The dilemma here is quite similar to Paul’s words in Philippians 1:23b-24: “my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.”

In the event that God chooses not to rescue Paul from peril after peril in this earthly life (1:10), Paul believes that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will also raise him and all the believers (4:14). He “walks” in light of this faith (5:7). Though Paul would rather be with Christ than bound to a body that has been afflicted, persecuted, and struck down (4:7-10; 5:8-9), the apostle’s hope allows him to be of good courage (5:6, 8) and urges him to live in a manner pleasing to God (5:9). Ever before Paul is the knowledge that Christ will return and will judge “so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil” (5:10).

Since Paul has this knowledge of Christ’s role as judge, he and his comrades earnestly seek to persuade others to live in a manner pleasing to God (5:11). Paul believes that his own life models the very message that he preaches. A major concern of this letter is to demonstrate his purity of motives to the Corinthians who are hearing messages competing with his own. Again and again, Paul mentions the need to commend himself (3:1-3; 4:2; 10:12, 18; 12:11). In 5:12 he argues that he is not commending himself to the audience again, but he certainly portrays himself and his colleagues in a manner contrary to those who take pride in their position and status. The apostle believes that the sincerity of his message is clearly demonstrated by the many perils that he has faced in order to deliver the good news to the church. He reminds them of his faithfulness so that they may have cause to be proud (5:12-13) of their father in the faith (1 Corinthians 4:15; 2 Corinthians 10:14). Earlier in the letter Paul had emphatically reminded them, “You yourselves are our letter [of recommendation], written on our hearts, to be known and read by all” (3:2). Later in this letter, his tone becomes more defensive as he reminds them of his relationship with them and as he directly contrasts himself with the so-called “superapostles” who challenge his character, teaching and authority (10:1-13:13). By the end of the letter he equates all of his hardships as “weaknesses” that display the power of Christ to give him strength (12:9-10; 13:4).

For Paul, the love of Christ controls his actions (5:14). He is thoroughly convinced that “one has died for all; therefore all have died.” The death of “all” foreshadows the passing away of the “old” in 5:17 to make way for a new creation. Those who have life, therefore, have life only through him who died for them and was raised for them, and

they owe their lives to him (5:15).

Those who have life in Christ are new creations (5:17). They should no longer live and make judgments “according to the flesh” (compare NRSV “from a human point of view,” 5:16). The word used here is $\sigma\alpha\rho\xi$, “flesh,” which Paul often uses to attach a negative connotation to earthly existence. It is, perhaps, best understood here as that which is currently bound to mortality. Though Christ became “flesh,” his victory over death ensures their future victory. Christ’s resurrection means that believers no longer know him in his fleshly existence, but now know that through Christ God demonstrates his power to reconcile the world to himself (5:18-19). Through their relationship with Christ, they — like Christ — are not bound to their fleshly existence. They become new creations. Their mortality will be swallowed up by life, and they now possess the Spirit as a guarantee (5:5) of this newness.

Paul has demonstrated through his actions that he, an ambassador of Christ (5:20), exemplifies this exhortation to live in Christ. Living for the one who died for all (5:15) is to live a life pleasing to the Lord (5:9), that is, to walk by faith (5:7). Though life in Christ entails hardships, the hope of what is to come is much greater than any affliction. The believers can live as new creatures because the message of reconciliation has transformative power. The church, like Paul, must live the message regardless of the costs.

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out another commentary available for these texts (and others!) at WorkingPreacher.org.

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading this passage?