

The Parable of the Healthy Church

Mark 4:26-34

The kingdom of God comes like the eruption of a massive solar storm, causing the collapse of modern civilization. Computers stop working, phones go dead, machinery grinds to a halt and airplanes fall out of the sky. About the only people who have the resources to survive are the Amish, who do not rely on modern technology.

This frightening story was not told by Jesus. Instead, it is found in the novel, *When the English Fall*, by a Presbyterian pastor named David Williams. In his book, “the English” are what the Amish call all non-Amish people. The English really suffer when their technology fails.

This novel is a parable — a story that holds up a mirror for us, helping us to see ourselves in a new way. The tension in the book increases when the English become desperate and start to go after the Amish and their food and other supplies. Facing the threat of invasion, the non-violent Amish must decide how to respond as Christians. How much are they obligated to share their resources? And, they wonder, when is violence an appropriate response to aggression?

These are questions not just for the Amish, but for all of us. They give us a mirror, which helps us discover how we should respond as followers of Christ. The parable invites us to wonder about the nature of the kingdom of God.

Jesus loved parables, and he told them throughout his ministry. In the fourth chapter of the gospel of Mark, Jesus tells the parable of the sower, the parable of the growing seed, and the parable of the mustard seed. All are stories that help us see ourselves more clearly.

In the parable of the growing seed, Jesus says, “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. The earth produces of itself first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head” (Mark 4:26-28).

In this story, we see the growth of the kingdom as something that is automatic. In fact, verse 28 says, “The earth produces of itself,” and the Greek for the phrase “of itself” is *automate*. We are invited to scatter seed, go to sleep, and then rise to see the seeds of the kingdom sprouting and growing. We do not know how the emergence happens, except that Jesus says it happens automatically.

Then Jesus tells the parable of the mustard seed. He begins with a question, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade” (vv. 30-32).

Jesus tells us that the kingdom is like one of the smallest of seeds. It is not impressive to look at, but once it is sown it “becomes the greatest of all shrubs and puts forth large branches.” These branches become places of safety and hospitality, where “the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

These parables help us see ourselves and the kingdom of God in a new way. Mark tells us that Jesus did not speak the word to crowds of people “except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples” (v. 34).

So, what do these parables teach us? First, the emergence of the kingdom of God is automatic if we plant the right seeds and trust good things to happen. Second, the seed of the kingdom is often small and unimpressive, but it grows into a large shrub that can be a much-needed place of safety and hospitality.

We need the growth of the kingdom now, more than ever. In the past 25 years, about 40 million Americans have stopped going to church. Yes, you heard right: 40 million. That's about 12% of the population. Writing in *The Atlantic*, Isabel Fattal says, "Contemporary America simply isn't set up to promote mutuality, care, or common life. Rather, it is designed to maximize individual accomplishment as defined by professional and financial success."

In America today, large numbers of people are not interested in mutuality, care or common life. They have left the church because they do not think they need it. They are like birds who fly away from the branches of the mustard shrub, not taking the time to make nests in its shade.

Our culture has told people that the priority is individual accomplishment, defined by professional and financial success. Get a good education, work long hours and make it on your own. Many people are finding their identity more in individual accomplishment than in community participation.

On this Father's Day, we are certainly grateful for the men in our lives who have been good fathers and grandfathers to us. But we also know that many have fallen into the trap of defining their accomplishments in terms of professional and financial success. This can lead to some heights of happiness, but also to some depths of despair. And this approach to success has snared many women as well.

Writer Derek Thompson coined the term *workism* in 2019. He uses the term to describe how work has morphed into “a kind of religion, promising identity, transcendence, and community.” People think that work will provide them with a sense of identity, an opportunity to go beyond normal human experiences, and a deep sense of connection with people around them.

But guess what? *Workism* doesn’t deliver on these promises.

The problem with *workism* is that there is no automatic growth provided by God. *Workism* looks down on things that are small and unimpressive, like a mustard seed. And *workism* does not provide a safe and hospitable environment, one in which people can nest in safety and security.

What people need to hear today is a new story: The parable of the healthy church. This is a 21st century story of how the Christian community might better serve its members and its neighbors. When we look in this mirror, we gain a new understanding of Christian identity, transcendence and community. Like the parables of Jesus, it reveals to us the kingdom of God.

The story begins with *identity*. Picture this: In a healthy church, people see themselves as followers of Jesus, not as workers in a global economy. They consider themselves to be disciples of Christ, trying to love as Jesus loved and serve as Jesus served. They see themselves and others as precious children of God, valuable for who they are, not for what they do. In a healthy church, members identify themselves as being made in the image and likeness of God.

Next comes *transcendence*. A healthy church provides opportunities for transcendence in worship, Bible studies and spiritual growth activities. This means that people go beyond normal human experience and gain a sense of God’s nature and power. “A vibrant, life-giving church,”

says writer Jake Meador, “asks people to prioritize one another over career, to prioritize prayer and time reading Scripture over accomplishment.” When we do these things, we go beyond everyday *workism* and have an opportunity to grow closer to God. We discover that the kingdom of God really does grow automatically if we let it do so.

Finally, the parable includes *community*. The tragedy of contemporary American life is that it does not support care, mutuality or common life. Isolation is on the rise in the United States today, and loneliness is a big problem. In fact, Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy calls it an epidemic. But churches can combat isolation and build neighborly bonds. “Religious or faith-based groups can be a source for regular social contact,” writes the surgeon general, “serve as a community of support, provide meaning and purpose, [and] create a sense of belonging around shared values and beliefs.”

In healthy churches, congregations focus on providing people with a safe and welcoming community of faith. Like the mustard shrub that provides branches and shade for the making of nests, churches offer their members and neighbors a place of security and comfort. Churches can be “better, truer sorts of communities,” says Meador, “ones in which the hungry are fed, the weak are lifted up, and the proud are cast down.” Like the Amish in the novel, *When the English Fall*, we are challenged to respond as Christians to the needs of the world around us. This week we respond to the needs of our children as we gather them together for Vacation Bible School. We thank all our volunteers for making it happen.

Stories can change our perspective, and the parable of the growing church helps us see ourselves in the kingdom of God. Each of us can help provide much needed identity, transcendence and community, for ourselves and for our neighbors. We don’t have to be part of

a megachurch — remember, the small mustard seed becomes the greatest of all shrubs. And we don't have to do it all on our own — remember, the seed of the kingdom grows automatically, through the power of God.

The challenge for each of us is to put our trust in the work of God's kingdom, not in the *workism* of the world. The parable of the healthy church is a story that we can bring to life. Together, we can provide identity, transcendence and community, but only if we let the seed of God's kingdom grow among us.

May the peace of God . . .

Sermon Hymn - All Are Welcome #641

Closing Hymn – Our Father , by Whose Name #640