

KINGDOM OF POTENTIAL

Series: Stories Jesus Told

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Jesus, Parables, Kingdom of God, Seed, Potential

Mark 4:3-8, 13-20, 26-29

When I was a young boy, I liked to help my dad in the garden - the shamba. We had a large shamba and we would get up early on a Saturday, go into our garage to gather the necessary tools, and work all morning doing whatever needed to be done. Most of the time that involved weeding, sometimes watering, checking on the health of the plants, spreading insecticide to keep the bugs away. But there were two times a year that were my favorite - planting and harvesting - the beginning and end of the growing cycles.

The planting time was fun because I got to use the power tiller to plow the ground, then I got to place seeds in the rows - corn, different kinds of beans, carrots, potatoes, squash, you name it. I was fascinated by the fact that those little seeds would grow into these big plants - especially the corn - taller than me.

I learned in school about the science of how plants grow, but it still seemed so incredible. A tiny seed, a little sun, and a little water, and all of a sudden, you have these big vegetables that human beings can eat in order to live. Life from this tiny little seed. And what I eventually came to realize was that within that little seed was a ton of potential. Some seeds, I knew, wouldn't grow. Some would be eaten by animals. But some of them would realize their potential and emerge from the soil victorious! And even at a young age, I realized that a simple seed can be incredibly inspirational. I would later learn that Jesus saw that inspiration, too.

Last week, we began a series called Stories Jesus Told where we're looking at these stories that we sometimes call parables - stories Jesus told that weren't factual stories, but which he told to illustrate a point - kind of like a fable. And I said last week that most of the time these stories didn't make a whole lot of sense. They weren't easy to understand. And often, Jesus' closest followers would take him aside and ask him, "What on earth does that mean?"

But over the years, we've come to understand a bit about what Jesus meant by some of these stories. And so, in this series, we're looking at these stories Jesus told about this thing called the Kingdom of God and the different aspects of that Kingdom.

When we talk about the Kingdom of God, we're talking about both a place and a time where God rules completely. In our everyday world, we see that God doesn't take charge everywhere all the time. And we can wonder why that's the case, but there's no doubt that,

like most parents, God doesn't correct everything that we're doing wrong. He's not a helicopter parent standing right next to us making sure we don't screw up.

And as a result, we do screw up and we hurt others and hurt ourselves and do a lot of harm in our world. Nevertheless, there is both a place - a spiritual realm that we aren't always aware of, but which we sometimes glimpse - and a time - a future point in which God is going to restore the world to the way he intended it to be - and that place and that time are the Kingdom of God.

What we get glimpses of every so often are the moments when that reality - that place and time - break into our current reality.

A few weeks ago, I was driving through Nairobi - or rather, I was sitting still in traffic in Nairobi - and I decided I wanted to listen to some music. I turned on the radio, and since I don't know anything about the radio stations in Nairobi, I was just sort of scanning through them, seeing if there was anything interesting. And as I was scanning through, I landed on a station with a song I recognized, but then in my eagerness to scan through, I hit the button again and the radio moved on to the next station.

I was like, "Oh, that last station might have been a good one! I want to go back!" So I hit the back button, and the station wasn't there. I hit the forward button again and the station wasn't there. I had heard a glimpse of that station, but now it was nowhere to be found.

The Kingdom of God can sometimes be like that. We catch just a glimpse of it every now and then, and then it's not there any more. We see God do miraculous things in our world, and then we see hurt and pain in that same world. And so we struggle to understand what this whole Kingdom of God thing is about.

So, since this is a hard topic to grasp, and since Jesus told so many stories about it, we decided to look at some of them. Last week, we looked at the story of this disrespectful, erratic son and how his father welcomed him home, embraced him, and threw a party for him. And I said that understanding that aspect of the Kingdom - that it is a Kingdom of Grace - is foundational for understanding everything else about God, his kingdom, and his church.

This week, I want to look at a few more stories Jesus told. And I assume that, just like me, Jesus must have helped his dad in the shamba, too, because he loved to tell stories about seeds. In fact, he liked to compare this great big infinite thing we call the Kingdom of God to that very finite, tiny thing we call a seed. And so, this morning, just like his disciples 2000 years ago, we'll be trying to figure out what on earth Jesus meant in these stories. I've called this talk Kingdom of Potential.

But before we do that, let me pray that God will open our eyes, ears, and hearts to what he has for us this morning.

Prayer

When we think about God, even people who aren't sure they believe in God, there's one thing that just about everyone can agree on. If there is a God, he is *big*. Almost by definition, God is BIG. If he wasn't big, he wouldn't really be God, would he?

Jesus, when he was walking around Jerusalem, was surrounded by religious people who also would agree that God is big. That's why it's such a shock when Jesus starts talking about the Kingdom of God being like a seed.

One time, Jesus said that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed - that even though it's this tiny seed, it grows into this giant tree. Now, I've done a bit of research on mustard trees, and particularly the common variety in that region at that time, and here's what I discovered.

The seed of the *Salvadora persica* - the mustard tree - is sometimes as small as 1mm in size. But it's packed full of potential. In fact, under optimal conditions, the seed will sprout within 24 hours of being planted. Then, in just 2 or 3 years time, this little 1mm thing will grow into a plant that's over 20 feet tall! Look at that thing! From a 1mm seed.

Jesus says the Kingdom of God is like that. And I think what he's saying might be that our *perception* of the Kingdom of God is like that - something that seems small and insignificant to us is actually like that little mustard seed - it packs a punch!

Here's what I believe. I believe the Kingdom of God is ready to sprout in Nakuru. Not the kingdom of the next great preacher. Not the kingdom of the next con artist claiming to be a prophet. I believe the Kingdom of *God* is ready to sprout in Nakuru...but we've got to plant it.

Let me pivot for a moment to what this means for a church like ours. Right now, we are a mustard seed - just a little church in the middle of Kenya. Nobody knows who we are and nobody is paying attention. But we have sprouted quickly. And while I don't know how large this church will grow in numbers - only God knows that - I believe wholeheartedly that this church will be at the center of whatever is happening in this city.

In a few years time, I hope everyone in Nakuru knows about Trinity Vineyard Church - not because I want fame for myself or this church, but because I hope we've made enough of an impact in this city - that we've embodied the good news of Jesus in such a way - that people simply must find out who we are and why we do what we do. From mustard seed to mustard tree.

So, how does that work, exactly? How do we get from mustard seed to mustard tree? *I don't know!*

That's why I'm encouraged by another one of Jesus's stories where he talked about the Kingdom of God being like a growing seed. He said,

"This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."

Mark 4:26-29

Well, alright! The seed grows for the farmer, whether or not he can understand *why* it's growing. That's good news if I'm supposed to be helping to grow the Kingdom of God - because I don't know how to do that. I don't know how it works. But, like that farmer, I think I have an idea of how to plant a seed.

I think maybe it starts with how I treat people. It starts with the conversations I have. It starts with all those little things - those seeds - that I have in my possession. Every time I show love and care, I plant a seed of the kingdom. Every time I serve selflessly, I plant a seed of the kingdom. Every time I reach out to someone who is lonely, take time to pray with someone in need, or welcome an outsider, I'm planting seeds of the kingdom that will ultimately do what seeds do: they will grow!

Do you know that it's not up to you or me to change somebody's heart toward God any more than it is up to the farmer to make the seed grow? Jesus says, "That guy just sleeps and gets up, sleeps and gets up. The seed does what seeds do."

The Kingdom of God, it seems, is a long game. Being a person of the Kingdom involves planting lots of seeds and then being patient as they grow. And if we're patient, sometimes, God lets us be part of the harvest. In other words, if I'm willing to invest in this person for 5, 10, 20, 30 years - planting seeds and planting seeds and planting seeds - God might let me stick around long enough to wake up one morning to see a giant crop of the Kingdom in this person's life.

And, you know, the cool thing about that is that this seed that has grown and turned into food is also producing more seeds - more potential Kingdom crops. It is spreading. It is propogating.

Again, let me pivot to this church. You see, it's not enough for us to grow a church in Nakuru - no matter how great and God-honoring and Kingdom-oriented it is. Because a tree is only as good as its fruit - and every fruit bears seeds.

We don't simply want to be a good church full of good people. We want to be a church that is propagating - that is reproducing - that is spreading throughout this region and the world.

Let me throw something crazy out for you to chew on. My prayer is that we can send out our first church plant within our first three years. So, that means two and a half years from now - because the church is 6 months old. In two and a half years, I want to be talking about our new church plant in...I don't know...Kisumu? Naivasha? Or closer...Njoro? Gilgil?

Healthy plants produce more plants. Healthy churches produce more churches.

Jesus had another seed story (a couple more actually, but I'll end with this one). On one occasion, Jesus goes out onto the lake in a boat and he starts teaching the crowds with this weird story (this is recorded in Mark chapter 4, Matthew chapter 13, and Luke chapter 8) - he says,

"A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times."

Mark 4:3-8

And then he said this weird thing:

"Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

People are like, "Yeah! I have ears! I've heard. And you're crazy!"

You see, there's a problem: that's not how you sow seed. That's not how it's done! The people listening to Jesus's story probably walked away saying, "That guy's an idiot! If he sows seed like that, he's wasting a quarter of his seed." Any good farmer knows exactly what happens if you try to grow stuff on a path or in rocky places or among thorns. Of course that will never work. Why would you toss seed in that direction? You're just wasting the seed.

No, you sow seed deliberately on the ground that is ready for it. It doesn't make any sense to do it any other way.

What's this about? Well, that's just what Jesus' closest friends and followers asked him! They waited until they were alone with him, and they were like, "Jesus, what in the world?" And Jesus explained it to them - kind of. He said:

"Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown."

Mark 4:13-20

OK. That makes sense. There's a lot of *potential* for spiritual growth there, but it has to be the right soil. So the question, then, that Jesus' followers don't ask, but I ask when I read this is, "So, are we to just wildly scatter seed and let happen whatever happens? Are we supposed to simply *identify* the soil? Or are we supposed to *prepare* the ground?"

And I've heard some people suggest that what this story is all about is the fact that we're supposed to spread the word of God wildly and erratically and let God sort out the details. But that's not at all what Jesus' original audience would have heard. It's not what they would have left talking about.

I said last week that Jesus told these odd stories because they got people thinking. They got them talking. And at some point along the way - later that afternoon - I bet somebody locked into it.

Understand, Jesus was talking to a Middle Eastern farming community. And the problems he talked about were common. It is a rocky place, so even in the middle of a field, there will be rocks. It's also a place where the fields are open, so people sometimes short cut through and leave worn paths behind. And, with any fertile ground, weeds and thorns and other plants tend to grow along side the crop. Good growing conditions for crops are also good growing conditions for weeds.

And what the people understood is that, even though your faced with these issues, if you are deliberate with your seed sowing, you can ensure that the majority of it lands on good soil. And, in fact, if you spend a little time prepping the soil - loosening the soil on the path,

clearing out the rocks and thorns - then you actually stand a much better chance of success with your crop.

Yes, this is a story about the *results* of sowing in different types of soil, but it's really the story about the *potential* that exists in a person and the necessity for the soil to be ready.

In fact, I think Jesus might have been literally practicing what he was preaching here. Because when Jesus was asked, just after telling this story, why he taught in parables, he said this:

*“The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that,
“they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,
and ever hearing but never understanding;
otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!”
Mark 4:11-12*

Sounds to me like he's saying, "I'm not speaking plainly to them because their soil isn't ready yet!" He didn't want them to perceive, to understand, to turn, only to find that the seed was snatched up by birds or without any root or choked out by thorns. Instead, he was revealing the true word of God - in its fullness - to those who were ready - those who were good soil.

Do you get that? Jesus tells this story, then they ask him why he speaks in parables, and he essentially says, "Weren't you listening to the story? If I tell them, and they aren't ready, then I'm wasting seed."

Now, that's blasphemous to some people. Some of my evangelist friends would have me drawn and quartered for making a statement like that. That's why I didn't make it. Jesus did. But it wasn't a statement about choosing to share or not share about Jesus. It was a statement about choosing *how to invest* in another person.

You know, everybody you run across might not be ready for a "clear presentation of the gospel of Jesus." But everybody is ready to be served - to be loved - to be given a chance - to be encouraged. The soil on the path, in the rocky places, and filled with thorns - all that soil is waiting to be *cultivated*, to be cared for.

And we can go out and shout down people with the "word of God", but Jesus says, "Yeah, and that word is going to be taken from them, it's going to have a hard time taking root, it's going to be choked out by the worries of this world." How about, instead, you care for people in a way that the soil of their hearts is softened, that the rocky places - the injustices in their lives and cultures - are cleaned up, that the worries of not having enough or of failed

relationships or of not being worthy of love - what if we focused on caring for people so that those obstacles were no longer there. *Then* we could sow seed.

But that's a lot of work, isn't it? It's easier to just preach at people. It's easier to just post stuff on Facebook. It's easier to just scatter seed. But it's not what's best. Farmers know this.

So, let me ask you a question. Where and how are you sowing Kingdom seed? Are you just sort of tossing it out there - like some kind of God sprayer? You know, come what may! Evangelize them all and let God sort them out.

Or are you willing to take the time and expend the energy to cultivate the soil - to recognize that before you can talk about Jesus and God and all the good stuff, sometimes there's work to be done. Sometimes it's really really physical work - like feeding people or helping them get on their feet financially. Sometimes it's emotional - helping people to believe that they're lovable and that there are people who will accept them and a God who loves them.

Are you willing to do that kind of one-on-one work?

Maybe you've sat here and you've listened to all this and you go, "Not only am I not sowing Kingdom seed, but I've been listening for a half hour and I still have no idea what the Kingdom is." That's OK.

Let me confess something to you. I spent probably 2 or 3 years hearing about the Kingdom of God and how important it was that we become the Kingdom of God before I ever really began to get it. But know this: When you see someone pray and their prayer is answered, you've caught a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. When something bad happens and you tell yourself, "Everything happens for a reason," recognize that you are speaking a truth that anticipates the active participation of the Kingdom of God in your life.

And when you hear what God is doing with this church - this little homeless church in Nakuru. When you hear how he comes through for us - because I know he will - just remember...that is the Kingdom of God. We don't get to see it all the time or all at once, but we get to see glimpses...if we're willing to look for them.

Let's pray

Prayer

We're going to move now into a time of personal response. And there several ways to respond:

1. Singing

We're going to sing some songs together that help us reflect on some of these things.

While that singing is taking place, you will also have the opportunity for prayer.

2. Prayer

If you need prayer for anything at all, we have people here who are eager to do that.

Also, while that is going on, you'll have a chance to take communion

3. Communion

Communion is a symbolic act, instituted by Jesus as a way for us to remember the way he willingly died for us. The unleavened bread serves as a symbol of Jesus' body broken on the cross. The wine or juice symbolize his blood that was spilled for us.

We have people ready to serve you communion. Juice is on your left, wine is on your right. Feel free to partake of either, as it fits with your tradition. Just break off a piece of the bread, dip it in the cup, and eat.

We offer communion each week for *anyone* who wants to take it. There's no membership requirement or hoops to jump through. You are guests at this symbolic table of Jesus, so please feel free to partake.

4. Giving

Lastly, during this time, you will have an opportunity to give financially to the work of this church. If you're a guest with us today, we don't expect you to give anything. However, for those who consider this your church home, and for those who believe in what we're trying to do here, this is our chance to give back to God a portion of what he has given us, and to support the work he has called this church to in Nakuru.

There is a tall box at the back with a slot in it. You can place your gifts in that box at any time as we are singing together.

So those are the four ways to respond: Singing, Prayer, Communion, and Giving. All will be happening simultaneously. There's no order you have to do them in. You don't have to do them all. You don't have to do any of them. This is your time to respond in whatever way you desire.

At the end of that time, I'll pray a prayer of blessing over you before you go.

Closing Prayer