

What a Pain

A Sermon Expositing Mark 4:26-34

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{Prep Phone with Pager Sound}

I learned everything I'll ever need to know about annoyance in a sterile maze of cinder block walls and vinyl composite tile. Well beyond the maintenance rooms and storage closets in a hallway off the beaten path where few have ventured is a little door in the basement of Brackenridge Hospital. And inside that little door is a little bed and a little refrigerator and a little tv. This is where the chaplain goes during the night if all is calm in the hospital – it rarely was. It wasn't much, but it was a welcome sight for weary bedside ministers if they're fortunate enough to see it.

More often you'll find them bouncing from floor to floor upstairs, answering as the pager beckons. {Beep-be-beep}, there's been an accident could you sit with the family while the doctor examines the extent of the damage. Yes, they will, until beep-be-beep. Mrs. Johnson in room 319 can't sleep and would like someone to pray with her. I'll be right there. Beep-be-beep down in the ICU someone needs to fill out a medical power of attorney, could you assist them? Beep-be-beep, Mrs. Johnson still can't sleep. Beep-be-beep, it's all rewarding work, but humans – even chaplains – are only able to do so much, beep-be-beep, beep-be-beep, beep-be-beep! But finally all falls silent. Mrs. Johnson drifts off peacefully to sleep and the chaplain is finally able to do the same. Back down there in the basement, the shoes are off, the lights are out, and the warm comforting blankets begin to assuage the anxiety of the race. Eyelids get heavy and the spell of sweet rest takes hold, and then....BEEP-BE-BEEP!!! It is so annoying! What a pain!?

What annoys you? Airport security? Clothes left on the floor by an otherwise loving partner? That gunk on the shower door that won't come off with any amount of scrubbing? Your boss? The yippy dog next door? Preachers that don't know when to quit? Reality tv? Slow drivers in the fast lane? The Kingdom of God?

What!?! The Kingdom of God isn't annoying, how could you suggest that it might be!?! Well, because Jesus said so I guess or didn't you notice that this morning? In Mark chapter 4 Jesus gets closer to a definition of what the Kingdom of God is than anywhere else in the gospel. The "Kingdom of God" is one of those phrases that seems to evade simple definition. It clearly points to the reign of God in the world both in the present and in the future, but what exactly God is about in the world is left to images and stories and teachings. We see this phrase and its closely related sibling word, "gospel," come up when sight is restored, when evil is driven away, when community is redeemed. It seems that this redemption thing has a great deal to do with defining the Kingdom of God. But in today's reading we get another little piece of the definition in a couple of parables.

The Kingdom of God is like seed, which human hands plant and harvest, but in between there's no control. Without state-of-the-art irrigation and modern pesticides the ability to manipulate the crop's production really was mostly a matter of chance. Even in today's world all we can really do is *help* the seed. The growth process is still a natural process fulfilled by the earth. Could it be that in the Kingdom human kind has a role to play, but the ultimate work to be done is out of our hands? That would just be annoying!

But really Jesus pointed out the annoying nature of the Kingdom of God with the mustard bush. A favorite way of understanding this parable is to say that the Kingdom of God starts tiny and grows and grows to

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

unimaginable limits. There's certainly an element of expansiveness to be understood here, but we're missing a couple of things. Why the mustard bush? It wasn't the largest of all plants in the region. In fact, some translations credibly say the mustard seed grows to be the *LARGEST OF ALL THE – herbs*. The parable isn't really about how *big* the plant grows, but about how and where this dramatic expansion happens. We might miss it, because we're not accustomed to first century Palestinian agricultural practices, but the original readers of Mark's gospel knew the mustard bush better than we do. They knew, it was annoying! They couldn't track down where the nearly invisible seeds might be scattered with the wind or by birds and so the irritating bushes would spring up everywhere they weren't supposed to be, everywhere they could cause a problem – they were weeds! What a pain! Are we supposed to understand that the Kingdom of God might just sprout up in places and at times that we might wish it wouldn't! Oh, this is going to be a problem.

I believe I've told you about a wonderful ministry I got to be part of during my time in Austin, God's Family Dinner. I'm not sure I've mentioned how that ministry got its start. The congregation of University Baptist practiced a lovely tradition shared by many congregations, a Wednesday night meal together. It was a beautiful time for church members to break bread together, catch up on the events of the week, and simply be in community. The UBC regulars loved the time they had together, and occasionally a visitor would come and join them for dinner. One such evening a person stopped in hungry and asked if he could have a bit of food. It was clear his hygiene wasn't quite up to community standards and his social skills were something less than the rest of the attendees. The folks gathered that evening pulled together a plate and welcomed the man to their table. He was no annoyance at all.

The next week though, the man arrived again and had spread the word. Several other people with no place to call home arrived as well. The food supplies were stretched a bit, but they found a way to put a plate down for everyone. That was a bit disruptive, but not yet a full blown annoyance. In the following weeks though, more people in need of a meal showed up. The family dinner, for some, wasn't looking much like a family dinner at all anymore. There were proposals on how to deal with the situation and how to protect the sanctity of their time together. In the meantime though, the crowds of those who had heard about UBC's generosity had swelled. Soon it was more than just a minor annoyance, it was requiring people to put a lot of work into food preparation and it was costing more than their institutional or personal budgets had anticipated. What had been a sort of family dinner for them had become a real pain!

It wasn't an easy decision, but when someone said, "God surely brought these new friends here, who are we to turn them away?" everyone agreed they would do what they needed to continue feeding whoever walked through the doors - and not on the cheap either. They would serve restaurant quality hot meals. Before long, the church members who were accustomed to putting their feet under the table for a relaxed meal were donning aprons and working hard in the kitchen to plate enough meals. Volunteers from all over Austin would be recruited to help with the undertaking as it grew, and eventually due to logistics the meal would be moved to Thursday night. It had grown into a full-fledged pain!

It did feel to some at times that the family meal had died, but it seems the family meal had simply been overgrown by the Kingdom of God. Hence the name, "God's Family Dinner." They now serve over 200 hot plates every Thursday night with volunteers coming to play the piano during dinner or provide free haircuts and other services, but make no mistake, it's still a pain! Volunteers don't arrive on time, guests arrive in the throes of emotional break downs, ovens don't work right, people are thankless at times. It's a pain, but that's just because nobody at UBC or anywhere else has control of where or how the seed might grow.

In fact, given the opportunity to build my own kingdom I would certainly lean toward luxury and comfort. It would be great for me, but as for everyone else well, get your own Kingdom. That's not how God's Kingdom works. Justice, peace, equity, love, and redemption reign in God's Kingdom and sometimes that means I have to deal with an inconvenience or an annoyance, but that's the beauty – it isn't my Kingdom!

I don't get to control how, when, or where it grows. We'll never know when the annoyance might take root among us. Perhaps it will grow right here in the middle of the courtyard making us have to shift our chairs around. It might even grow inside in the sanctuary where weeds certainly have no business unless God puts

them there. It could grow right in the middle of a committee meeting. What would happen if it started grow in our pocket books or sprouted in our calendars? We would be annoyed for sure, but we would know the Kingdom of God is surely upon us. What if those little mustard seeds blew right into the heart of the way we do church and life together? What a pain that would be!