

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 14th, 2015

Everybody is posting these days. It's so easy. Time was, if you wanted to post a community message, you had to type it up in big letters. Then, you had to drive out to some public place and actually affix it to a real wooden or metal post so that passerby could see it and read it.

All during that drawn out process, you had the opportunity to rethink what you had said and, if necessary, if it turned out to be something you really should NOT be saying, to take it back and take it down before somebody saw it and responded to it in shock or anger.

Today, with the immediate posting prowess by the likes of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, there is no grace publication period. What you think, if you dare write it down, is instantly conveyed throughout the entire world. I remain amazed at the number of people who think their private musings about sensitive

matters like race, religion, politics, and gender need to be shared with the public.

The technology wizardry of our social media generation amplifies the importance of Mark Twain's classic counsel: "It is better to keep your mouth closed and let people think you are a fool, than to open it and remove all doubt."

As I read through the New Testament and reflect on this matter of thoughts that one should say out loud and thoughts that one should keep to oneself, I have wondered how Jesus would have fared in our social media age.

Can you imagine how Jesus would have fared if he had had license to Tweet! While they are writing the obituary, picking out the casket, and preparing for the funeral, someone in the bereaved family reaches out to Jesus for counsel. Jesus Tweets: "Let the dead bury their own dead."

Jesus, you keep talking about the Reign of God, but you never give any details. Can you please clarify exactly what you mean by this Reign of God? What comes back? An Instagram

picture of Jesus standing beside an 8 foot shrub – the caption reads: “The Reign of God is like a mustard seed. When sown on the ground, it is the smallest of all seeds. But when it grows up, it becomes the greatest of shrubs and puts forth large branches, so that birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

Jesus uses the mustard seed parable as the anchor parable in a chapter filled with parables. Before he explains the opening parable in the chapter, the parable of the sower, Jesus offers what one might consider very odd words for a teacher: “To you has been given the secret of the Reign of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables, in order that they might indeed look, but NOT perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand.”

I believe there are two reasons for these odd words. First, Jesus is trying to focus his disciples, and ultimately the crowds and us, to see that the words of the parables will always be incomprehensible as long as we focus on the words and not the key to deciphering the words. The key is Jesus himself. Jesus is trying to get us to look to who he is, how he lives, what he does as the filter through which we can hear and understand the parables.

His life and ministry clarify the parables and their meaning. But that is also precisely the problem. Nobody, not even his disciples fully at this stage in Mark's gospel, want to live our lives the way Jesus lived his life. By this point in the gospel, he has touched lepers when the law says you should not. He has drawn women into his company, when tradition says you should not. He has sat at a table and associated with tax collectors who defraud the people and prostitutes who immorally serve the people and treated them as though they, too, belonged to the household of God.

We cannot understand and take part in Jesus' Reign unless we understand Jesus, and likewise participate in Jesus' strange, uncomfortable ministry. But we don't want that. Nobody wants that. Because the life Jesus lives is too hard.

The second reason Jesus talks in riddles is that he intends to befuddle the crowds so he can sneak a subliminal God message in past their intellectual and spiritual defenses. On the surface, this parable seems to be a simple contrast between the smallness of the seed and the largeness of the shrub. Joel Marcus interprets the contrast rightly, I think when he says: "For the dominion of

God is like the word [of God] – small in appearance, but hiding a tremendous divine potency behind its apparent insignificance.”

Almost like the dominion of God sneaks up on us because we did not see it coming. We certainly did not appreciate its power because we were so mesmerized by its apparent insignificance. Marcus also counsels that “the whole comparison is not just to the object that is immediately mentions (here the mustard seed) but to the whole situation described in the parable.”

What is the whole situation?

In this nice little story about a tiny seed and a big shrub, Jesus slips in an infecting message of politics for people who do not want politics mixing up in their religion. Ched Myers argues: “there can be no question that this parable concerning the disproportion between the seed and the mature plant is meant to instill courage and hope in the small and fragile discipleship community for its struggle against the entrenched powers.”

This is particularly important information because at the time when Mark writes his Gospel, Gentiles have made themselves most unwelcome in the land. Mark’s community lives

into Jesus' mandate that God's House is a house of prayer for all peoples by creating an integrated worshipping community of Jew and Gentile. Could it possibly be that this tiny seed of faith might one day become a shrub large enough to provide shade and nurture for integrated humankind?

The parable suggests that the answer is yes. The parable does not just describe the world God intends. The parable provokes our participation with God in establishing the world God intends. The parable slips in the infectious message that to follow Jesus is to extend the reach of this seed as far as possible. If Jews and Gentiles, if black and white, if people of every ethnicity and sexual orientation, and place in life will make up the Reign of God when it is a full grown shrub, should we not be about the work of planting the mustard seed of religious and ethnic integration in every church, in every Christian, in every human being, in every circumstance we encounter right now?

John Dominic Crossan observes that the point is not just that the mustard seed starts small and ends big, but that you just do not want it in your garden, because it likes to get big by taking over.

The mustard seed parable is suggesting that we may look small in comparison to the world's problems, the city's problems, our family problems, but we are a part of an infectious kingdom on the spread.

Live into that belief with the trust that when we run rampant with God's kingdom message, God's word, and God's reality will spread.

In his commentary on Mark, Eugene Boring says it well: "It is true that the parable is a parable of contrast: the tiny beginnings of Jesus and Mark's own day will grow to fill the world and become the ultimate, all-embracing kingdom. But the readers must ponder whether the unconventional Jesus and his unconventional band of followers represented this kingdom." Do we? Do we represent THIS kingdom?