

Four priest buddies all were big time duck hunters. The place where they hunted owned several Labrador retrievers which were available for hunters to use. They were to pick one, and they ended up choosing a Black lab that turned out to be a truly outstanding retriever. The dog was totally black except for a white patch in the front of his neck, which made him look like he was a priest wearing a Roman collar. So they called the dog 'padre,' and every year they insisted that he was the dog they wanted for their hunt. One year the Bishop asked if he could join the priests on the hunt. He was so impressed with the dog that he made it a monsignor. The following year when the priests went back, they asked for padre. "He's not here anymore." "Why not?" asked the priests. "He was a young dog and a great hunter." "He's no good anymore. Ever since the bishop made him a monsignor, he just sits around and barks." So you can tell that to all of your monsignor friends – and now you know why I'M not a monsignor! HA!

The proclamation of 'the kingdom of God' builds on the tradition of Yahweh's rule over all creation, and it is fundamental to Jesus' mission. Mark's gospel uses the expression 18 times, Matthew, with his equivalent expression 'kingdom of heaven' uses it 49 times, and Luke, 40 times. Clearly, the kingdom of God is central to understanding the entire Gospel. Jesus proclaims that God's power and rule over creation are breaking into our world, and God is claiming the allegiance of His disciples. We now belong to a different kingdom – GOD'S, and we pray for THAT kingdom to come every time we pray the Lord's Prayer. This kingdom is not a geographical place; it is rather a relationship of power, in which God and creature are properly aligned. That's why we pray at the end of the Lord's prayer THY Kingdom come, not ours. God's power to rule is manifest in Jesus' ministry through His powerful deeds of healing and liberation. He is realigning the world – making the world as it is SUPPOSED to be. When we are about the work of healing and freeing others and our world, then we are about the work of the kingdom of God. (freely adapted from Luke Timothy Johnson, THE CREED, p. 208-209)

What the kingdom teaching in today's gospel also tells us is that life is more than meets the eye. While we go on often rather distractedly living the life we see in front of us, something mysterious is happening at the very heart of existence. Jesus showed them the Galilean fields: while they were walking along the paths without seeing anything special, something was happening in the soil; the seeds were being transformed into a beautiful harvest. That's the way the reign of God works. Its saving power was already at work in their lives, mysteriously transforming everything. Which prompts us to ask: Can life really be like that? Is God quietly acting in the inner core of our own lives? Is that the ultimate secret of life? Yes, yes, and yes! God is always at work in our lives and in our world – whether we perceive it or not. The One who created this world remains forever and always in charge, despite all evidence to the contrary.

But perhaps Jesus' most puzzling kingdom parable was the one we just heard about the mustard seed: It is the smallest of all seeds, we are told, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, putting forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade. Jesus could have talked about a fig tree, a palm tree, or a grape vine, as the tradition did. But surprisingly, intentionally, He chose the mustard seed which was thought of as the smallest seed of all. A grain the size of a pinhead becomes, in time, a bush 9 or 12 feet high in which, every April, little flocks of finches make their nests and eat their favorite seeds. The Galilean peasants could watch it happen every evening.

Jesus' language was perplexing and unprecedented. Everyone was expecting the arrival of God as a great and powerful event. They especially recalled the image of the prophet Ezekiel, who spoke of a 'noble cedar' planted by God 'on a high and lofty mountain,' which would 'produce boughs and bear fruit;' all kinds of birds and winged creatures would nest in the shade of its branches. For Jesus, the true metaphor of God's

reign was not the cedar, which people thought of as grandiose and powerful, but the little, weak and insignificant mustard seed.

The parable would likely have affected them deeply. How could Jesus compare God's saving power with a bush growing from a tiny seed? Was He asking them to give up the tradition of a great and powerful God? Were they supposed to forget God's mighty acts of the past, and watch for a God who is acting in such small and insignificant ways? Could Jesus be right? Each listener had to decide: to go on waiting for a powerful and mighty God, or take the risk of believing in His saving presence in Jesus' modest activity among mostly poor and insignificant Galilean peasants.

It was a hard choice. What could they hope for in something as insignificant as what was happening in those remote Galilean villages? Shouldn't they do something more to hurry things along? Jesus could see their impatience. To convey His total trust in God's action, He talked about the seeds farmers planted in their fields. The earth produced the harvest OF ITSELF. He was calling attention to a scene they were used to seeing every year in the fields of Galilee: first the planting, a few months later ripe grain all over the countryside. Every year they knew that the harvest would follow the planting. No one knew how it happened, but something mysterious was going on underground. The reign of God is like that. God is acting, quietly and secretly. We only need to wait for the harvest.

All the farmers do is put the seeds in the ground. Once they've done that, their job is done. The growth of the plants is not up to them; they can go to bed every evening, knowing the seeds are developing; they can rise in the morning and see that the growth has continued. Something is happening in their land, and they cannot explain. They will not be disappointed. In time they will reap the grain.

Everything worked together to bring on the day of the harvest: the farmer, the soil, and the seeds. But Jesus invited them to see God's hidden and powerful action in that growth. The new life they could see in the fields year after year was always a surprise, a gift, a blessing from God. The harvest was greater than what they could do by their own effort. That also is true of the kingdom of God. It doesn't correlate with the efforts we put into it. It is a gift of God, far beyond all the aspirations and labor we devote to it. We should not lose patience when the results don't come immediately; we should not act under time pressure. Jesus is planting the seed; God is already growing our life; the harvest is sure to come. Can this be true? Can we put more trust in Jesus and His message? What do we hope to reap in the end? The results of our efforts, or the fruit of God's action? A kingdom we have built, or our trusting, responsible acceptance of God's salvation? (adapted from Jose Pagola, JESUS, AN HISTORICAL APPROXIMATION, p. 128-131)

OK, so what? My second point. These parables have immediate application to our lives. We tend to be very much 'do-it-myself' kind of people. We often think that if I pray enough rosaries, attend enough masses, say enough novenas, that we will make ourselves holy. And God will love us and reward us – we won't get sick, our children will not die, our parents will not need to go a nursing home, I won't get cancer. It doesn't work that way. We can't earn our way into heaven. The gift has already been given to us – it is OUR job to ACCEPT it – and love God and neighbor as ourselves. So in the midst of our daily lives and our stumbling attempts to be faithful followers of Jesus, the kingdom is being born. When we forgive someone who has hurt us, stretch to help someone in need, put in an honest day at work, when students work on those summer reading lists from school WITHOUT BEING NAGGED BY THEIR PARENTS, when we love our spouse and children, take care of our neighbors, when we practice foul shots endlessly or practice an instrument until we produce beautiful music, when we tithe our time, talent and treasure, the kingdom is being built up IN us. Mysteriously, daily, continuously, grace is growing within us; the kingdom is coming in us. And the world

changes, because we are changing. Mostly imperceptibly, unnoticed, humbly without fanfare. This is the way it is with the kingdom of God. Grace is generally quiet, unobtrusive, penetrating but rarely making a fuss.

Third, a true example of this small, hidden growth of the kingdom. I imagine that all of you have heard of Maya Angelou, the African American poet who was the poet laureate of our country for several years. Frederick Buechner tells the story: After one of Maya Angelou's lectures, a person asked her about racism – has it gotten better or worse? And she said, "Let me tell you a story." She had been in the San Francisco Bay area 15 years or so before to do a public television program on African art, and out of the blue one day she got a telephone call from a white man who told her that he had a collection of a certain kind of African statue and perhaps she would like to come over and look at them. So she went over and they were wonderful examples of this particular African art form, and he lent them to her and she used them. Through this experience, they became great friends. She went to his house for dinner a number of times, got to know his wife, and Maya had them over to her place for dinner. She said it had been one of the bright spots during her time there, and then the public television show was over and she went back to where it was she went. Time went by and about 4 or 5 years later she returned to the Bay area, this time for a longer period of time. So right away she called up her friend, who told her he'd be delighted to see her again. He said, "Let me just catch you up on what I've been doing since I saw you last. I have been in Europe working on the problem with American troops over there. It's not easy for them," he said, "and it's especially hard for the black troops for obvious reasons. There aren't too many blacks over there, but *our* boys are also having a hard time..." She interrupted him. "What did you say?"

"I said, in Europe it's especially hard for the black troops, and that our boys are also..." "What did you say?" She had interrupted him again, she told us, because she wanted him to hear it. So again, "Well, the black troops...." and then he got it. "Oh my goodness! What have I said to you, of all people? The black troops....our boys. I'm so embarrassed I simply have to stop talking. I'm going to hang up. To say this to you, of all people."

And Maya had said, "No, don't. Don't hang up. This is just the time we need to talk. This is what racism is beneath the level of liberal utterance and superficial friendship, the sort of deeply rooted sense of we and they, the whites, the blacks, the browns, the whatever it is." So they finished off their conversation agreeing that they would meet. Then she said after that she had tried to call him innumerable times and left messages of one kind or another, and there was never any response at all. She told us that was the end, and when she had finished that question and answer time, she had been obviously very moved and sort of shaken by it. The next day she had started her lecture reflecting on this story about racism, saying, "As I left the room yesterday, a man stood up and said, 'Here I am!'"

No sooner had these words left her lips when this small, bearded, white Episcopal clergyman suddenly stood up in our midst a few rows behind me and walked down the aisle, up onto the platform, and put his arms around her. He was, of course, her friend who had been too embarrassed to talk to her anymore. And she cried and he cried and all of us cried because we just got a glimpse of the kingdom of God. So small and so mysterious. So powerful and so moving. So gorgeous. And it is in our midst! Every minute every day. Let the Church say Amen. (Adapted from Frederick Buechner, *THE REMARKABLE ORDINARY*, p. 51-53)