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The ABC's of Faith K - Kingdom

Mark 4:26-29 adapted from the J.B. Phillips translation
Then [Jesus] said, "The kingdom of God is like a farmer scattering seed on the ground and then going to bed each night and getting up every morning, while the seed sprouts and grows up, though the farmer has no idea how it happens. The earth produces a crop without any help from anyone: first a blade, then the ear of corn, then the full-grown grain in the ear. And as soon as the crop is ready, the reapers are sent in immediately, without delay, for the harvest-time has come now."

In our Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) family of churches across the United States, there are two things that virtually every congregation does at every Sunday worship service: they have communion and they say the Lord's Prayer. The congregations may be rural or urban, classical in musical styles or contemporary, more liberal or more conservative, older or younger, economically well-off or struggling, but you will almost always find these two items. Which also means that one of the words that virtually every congregation says every Sunday is the word "Kingdom." It's part, of course, of the Lord's Prayer: *"Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."* Thy Kingdom come. Each and every Sunday we millions of our Christian brothers and sisters pray these words. The word appears over 100 times in the four gospels. Many of Jesus' parables are about "the Kingdom" and even have the phrase *"the Kingdom of heaven is like..."* In those various parables, Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a hidden treasure or a mustard seed or yeast in a loaf of bread or – as in today's scripture – like the situation a farmer faces. We could spend weeks, in fact, on this image of "kingdom" as it appears in the gospels and as it is used by Jesus, and that, in fact, might be a good sermon series to come back to sometime. But today, as we continue our sermon series on "The ABC's of Faith," focusing on various words in the "Christian vocabulary," I want to talk about this word "Kingdom" by first suggesting some reasons we have a hard time with it, but then to focus on how

indeed it can remind us of something very important about God, a reminder that I think goes along very well with the emphasis to be found in the devotional booklet that our Elders have produced for us with its theme “Create In Us....”

When you think of the word “Kingdom,” what comes to your mind? One of the challenges in our day and time with this word is that on first blush it may well not connote much of anything that’s very relevant to us, for three reasons: First, it is obviously a very male word. Kings are men and we can unwittingly and unconsciously think that somehow the portrait of God that Jesus is aiming at with this image, this metaphor, is also somehow male. But you and I know that’s not the case. We use our language imperfectly to try to say something about God even knowing that we are only saying something incompletely true. God is no more – or less – male than female, and both kinds of imagery are attempts to say something about the One who loves us perfectly and amazingly in the same way a mother or father seeks to love her or his children - the difference being that God, unlike us, does so perfectly. A second challenge with the image of “Kingdom” and “King” is that in our day and age we may well think more of entertainment than anything else. The pomp surrounding the birth of a British royal baby or the shenanigans of this or that prince or princess doesn’t really help us understand or be convicted by the claim that Jesus is trying to make about the nature of God and the fact that that God is the One who is ruler of all that there is. Or, to take a third challenge, we may go to the opposite extreme and think that this notion of “King” or Kingdom is utterly oppressive because we have in mind a ruler who might say, literally or metaphorically, as the Red Queen in Alice in Wonderland did, “off with their heads,” a ruler who is capricious and all-powerful and may one day decide to do you harm. Such would not be a very hospitable Kingdom in which to live, nor a king worthy of trust and admiration and loyalty. So you see, one of the first challenges in hearing this or any of Jesus’ “Kingdom” parables is to find a way to make the very

concept fresh and relevant to us.

For, despite all this, it is nonetheless inescapable that Jesus does indeed talk about Kings and the Kingdom, and our job on this and every day, as we seek to use the Bible to deepen our faith is to see what indeed Jesus might be trying to tell us. Of all the parables that Jesus told about the “Kingdom,” our scripture this morning about the farmer planting his or her seeds is that one that I think may be most apt of teaching us something new about God, and for helping us avoid some of those traps and concerns about whether this old, old word can have any modern meaning for us. So let us look more closely, now, at that parable and I do believe that we will indeed discover something about God that can deepen our faith.

From time to time I’ve counseled you, when looking at a passage from one of the gospels, to also look at the “parallel” story in the other gospels. Many of Jesus parables are indeed found in more than one of the gospels – but with different emphases and subtle and not-so-subtle changes of perspective. Therefore, I’d like you now to also hear Matthew’s version of this same parable, written probably 10-15 years later than Mark; this is how he recounts Jesus’ parable:

..."The kingdom of heaven is like someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well...." The servants said... "Then do you want us to go and gather [the weeds]?" But [Jesus] replied, "No; for in gathering the **weeds** you would uproot the **wheat** along with them. **Let both of them grow together until the harvest....**"

To see the theological point that Jesus is getting at here, though, and to begin to re-discover something of what this notion of “Kingdom” can mean to us, we have to understand something about the farming practices of the day. In first century Palestine,

farming was done pretty much as this either version describes it: seed was simply scattered into a field, and then harvested when it was ready. It wasn't a lot more complex than that. And yet the parable, as **Matthew** re-tells it, says that while the owner and his family were sleeping, enemies came and sowed weeds in the field. Now lest you think this is farfetched, there was an actual Roman law on the books that made such a practice a serious crime. Why? Well, this wasn't just fun-spirited prank, akin to t-p'ing someone's house on Halloween – annoying and messy, but harmless. No, what Jesus describes was in fact deadly serious. For the kind of weed that was sown among the wheat looks in its *early* stage **exactly** like new wheat, and in its *later* stage its roots are tangled with the roots of the wheat so that pulling up the weeds means pulling up a lot of the wheat. So the farmer has a terrible dilemma: To try to get rid of the weeds *early* in the growing cycle means that it is sheer guesswork as to which is wheat and which is weed, guesswork on which your family's food supply depends – and the wrong guess means food that is forever destroyed. But to wait until later in the growing cycle, when the difference between weed and wheat is clearer will also mean that the farmer ends up destroying a lot of wheat because by then those co-mingled roots come out of the soil together. But if the farmer is patient enough and courageous enough to **not** do anything – and you and I know just how hard it can be sometimes NOT to do something when we are anxious! – and waits until the very end, the workers can easily identify which plant is which and the wheat can be harvested and the weed successfully ignored.

Are you beginning to see the point that Jesus is trying to make here? Although this parable is often seen as a parable about **judgment** (with those folks in this world who are “the weeds” getting their just desserts at the end of time), I actually think this parable is not really so much just about *judgment*, but about **hope**. **It's about not trying to control what can't be controlled and about trusting God to do everything**

God can to make what looks like it might be a weed into wheat. What do I mean? Well, sometimes what looks for all the world like a weed turns out to surprise us, to be wheat. Sometimes that which we thought was no good, something that we thought was destined for a bad end, turns out instead to be wheat. God can work some amazing surprises. And if we know or should know anything about God at all it is that ours is not a capricious king who is eagerly looking to take joy when someone's life gets overrun with weeds. No, God *wants you and I* to turn out to be wheat, and that means that God will patiently and persistently and passionately and tenaciously try to make that happen. **To say it again: *God gives what may look to be weeds every possible chance to turn out in fact to be wheat.*** Do you begin to see what an amazing "Kingdom" this is? It is a Kingdom where God wants and hopes and gives every possibility for every life for transformation to occur, for new creation to happen. This is a Kingdom where the weeds of soured relationships, and self-defeating behaviors, and addictions and destructive habits can in fact be transformed and moved beyond – what looked for all the world like it was only a weed in your life can indeed become something that nourishes you instead of hurts you.

You see, when all is said and done, we sometimes focus too much on the "end-of-times" aspect of this parable, yet this parable also speaks very much to our here-and-now – for it is also a caution to all of us who are sometimes too quick to be too judgmental and to pronounce someone a weed. And it is also a call for us to cooperate in God's patient work that **all** might turn out to be wheat! But, my friends, in order to do that, in order to trust in God's patient work to turn what is apparently weeds into what can become wheat, we have to give up our tendencies to want to control – because sometimes those very tendencies to try to control a good outcome can in fact make a bad outcome more likely! If you've ever baked a cake and are anxious about whether it

is doing okay and you open the oven door thirty-seven times you will find yourself with a collapsed cake. If you hover too much over your children as they grow up and chart new ways and make new decisions, if you try everything you can to help protect them from making bad decisions, you often will help ensure that they will rebel and go out of their way to do stupid things which they may well not have done if you hadn't tried so hard to control them! If you or I, out of our anxiety or our impatience or our worry attempt to control the changes in life or relationships or church we will often be assured that the changes will be worse than if we had resisted our attempts to control the future.

Now, this never means that instead we simply become passive, simply resigned to whatever happens, ceasing to do those things that God calls us to do. But it does mean that we must always be careful never to make premature judgements or take actions that would cut off God's possibility, the possibility that what indeed seemed to be weeds can in fact become wheat by the grace of God. And I suspect that every one in this room knows that is true: I invite you to think of a time, a moment in your life where it seemed that the lot of your life was filled with more weeds, more brambles, more thorns than anything else. Have you had times like that in your life? And have you then found that God was patiently, persistently, tenaciously working in that weed-filled lot of your life to bring good from it, to bring things of beauty, to move you from blight to bloom? I know I have had those moments, those times. And I know that I give thanks to the God who in those moments, those times, patiently worked with me and waited with me and hoped with me that indeed through the workings of the spirit and the word that I might instead bloom. And when that happens, we have indeed had a glimpse of the Kingdom right here and right now.

The disciples found this parable hard to understand. We find it hard to understand. After all, in times of anxiety and change we do tend to want to know how it all comes out, we have a sometimes huge urge to try to force, almost, a situation to

become wheat – even if doing so will sometimes paradoxically make it more likely that things will become weedier! But, my friends, the disciples, steeped in the Hebrew scriptures and the teachings of the prophets, should have known better. For there is a sense in which what Jesus is trying to convey about God’s hope and work for good and God’s counsel to resist premature judgment could have been found long before in those wonderful, incredible words from the prophet Jeremiah:

For I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you, says the LORD....

That is God’s job, God’s character, God’s everlasting promise to us: to always work to bring good, to always offer us, indeed, a future and a hope that is full of wheat amidst what we worried might only be weeds. For that abiding good news, for that Kingdom of patient, tenacious, ever-transforming, ever-creating love, thanks be to God indeed!
Amen.