



# First United Church of Oak Park

## **As Close As It Gets**

Mark 4: 26-34

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With many such parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables. He did not speak to them except in parables. They must be pretty important, then, these parables about the realm of God. It must be pretty important, then, this parabolic method of teaching about the realm of God. Then what are they? Parables, I mean. If Jesus doesn't teach except in a parable, I want to know what a parable is. A parable is a story, of course, with some kind of lesson. But it's more than that. A fable is a story with a lesson. A myth is a story with a lesson. A parable means something more specific than that. Maybe my classes in Greek will help!

The word parable is just moved straight over from Greek into English with little more than a change in accent. And the meaning in Greek is essentially the same as parabola. Parabola, the geometric shape, whose line is defined by its x axis being the square root of its y axis. Put another way, the shape of a parabola is the shape traced by any object on earth that is thrown or launched or cast along. It is the shape a baseball makes when it is thrown across a backyard. It is the shape a cannonball makes as it is launched over the horizon. It is the shape a seed makes as a sower casts it out onto the ground to grow. Parabola — it means cast along; parable — it means cast along, too. If over here you have the realm of God, a parable is a story cast along out after it. A parable about the realm of God is not itself the realm of God, but it is cast out alongside of it.

Enough about etymology and geometry; what about the parables themselves? Jesus gives us here a pair of twin parables, both about casting out seeds, both cast out alongside the realm of God. The first is about wheat. A sower is growing wheat, and day after day it grows, but the one who sowed the seed can never see it growing. Staring straight at it, he sees that it does not move, not an inch. But when the sower lies down and rises up, behold, it has grown. Day after day it grows on its own, without waiting for the permission of the sower, not relying on the one who began the thing to bring it to completion. Indeed, its growth cannot even be observed, cannot be looked

over, cannot be supervised. Yet it grows and flowers and matures and bears grain, enough to sustain life. The realm of God — I can participate in it, but it is not answerable to me. The realm of God, like wheat, doesn't rely on me for nourishment; I rely on it for nourishment. A parable, something cast alongside the realm of God. It is not itself the realm of God, but it is cast alongside it.

Or perhaps another parable will be illuminating. More seeds in this one, but instead of wheat this time it's mustard. The mustard seed is so tiny, only very dexterous fingers would be able to pick up a single one at a time. It's so tiny that it's easy to overlook, easy to underestimate, easy to assume that what was so small and seemingly insignificant would produce something that was also small and insignificant. Yet those tiny seeds grow into something huge and wild and strong, yielding not only a plethora more mustard seeds capable of growing more and more and more of itself, but strong enough to provide shelter for the vulnerable, for the birds of the air in need of rest from the wing. What is small, becoming great, great not only for its own sake but for the vulnerable. The realm of God. A pair of twin parables about casting seed, seed that grows in secret without waiting for our permission or permitting our supervision, seeds that grow from small things and become something greater than our expectations, and serving those not intended or included. Parables, cast alongside the realm of God. Not themselves the realm of God, but cast alongside it.

Parables are stories, with a lesson, but the lessons they are trying to teach are lessons that cannot be boiled down to something straightforward. They are cast alongside the realm of God because that is as close as it gets.

With many such parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables. He did not speak to them except in parables. They must be pretty important, then, these parables about the realm of God. But why?

Perhaps because the realm of God cannot be pinned down beneath human understanding to hold it in place; perhaps because the realm of God is not subject to our supervision or approval; perhaps because the realm of God is very much like God Herself. The realm of God, just like the very being of God, cannot be fully expressed. The best that can be done is to cast alongside of it with our lives.

If you seek the realm of God, you cannot think your way into it or analyze it small enough to fit in your pocket. The realm of God has to be lived into, planting seeds, covering lamps with a bushel basket, hiding yeast in flour, harvesting and sharing food, paying wages, welcoming home the prodigal, seeking the lost. Life, human life, cast out alongside the realm of God. In living our lives, in following God, in placing the good

news of the realm of God at the very center of how we live, we can cast ourselves alongside the realm of God. Our lives shall not themselves be the realm of God, but we can cast ourselves alongside of it, because that is as close as it gets. We baptize a child who on their 80<sup>th</sup> birthday will have seen a new century dawn — casting seeds into the world. Changing our energy supplier so that solar and wind give us the electricity to run this microphone — casting seeds into the world. Worshiping God with grace and humility, welcoming in those too long counted as unworthy — casting seeds into the world. What we do as Christians, what we do as a church, following after the way of Christ as best we can, these things are not themselves the realm of God. They are a parable of the realm of God; our lives are a parable of the realm of God, something cast alongside that realm. That is as close as it gets, even if it feels like launching a cannonball over the horizon at something we cannot see.

With many such parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables. He did not speak to them except in parables. They must be pretty important, then, these parables about the realm of God. And why? So that we transform our lives into parables of the realm of God. May God help us.