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Recently we've heard about two celebrities who have committed suicide. Every time we hear about someone in the public eye, it calls us into question: many of us know someone who has done the same, leaving family and friends in a state of shock, bewilderment, sadness, anger and guilt. News of celebrity suicide reminds us that no-one is exempt from its reach—we, as survivors, ask ourselves what we did wrong and how we could have missed the warning signs. Survivors blame themselves for not preventing the tragedy—for either doing too much of something or too little of something else. Not only this, but we either acknowledge our own incapacity to comprehend such behavior, or secretly admit how close we, ourselves, have come to making the same choice in the face of what, at the time, seemed like unbearable suffering.

It is human to want to avoid suffering—either through a desperate act or through some kind of distraction. Some distractions are bad for us. We know their names: denial, food, alcohol, drugs, overwork, buying stuff, etc. Just last week at the Pennington clergy association meeting we listened to local professionals tell about opiate use in the area and how they have been trying to prevent addiction here. Oxycontin costs about \$35 per pill, whereas heroin only costs about \$3.00 for a dose. They explained how heroine works: there is an initial, euphoric high that most heroine users experience the first time they use the drug can never be repeated. After the first use, the initial effect never comes back. As users build tolerance, it takes more and more heroin to get high. Users end up having to use just to NOT feel the ache of withdrawal. And these days, heroin is laced with Fentanyl. Fentanyl is one of the deadliest opioids, with a potency that is 50 times greater than heroin.

But, what if people could face into their suffering, asking it to teach them whatever wisdom it has in store for them? Where would the courage to do that come from? This morning's Gospel points us to the source of that courage and hope. In fact, Jesus' purpose in coming to us is to teach us about and to show us the Kingdom of God. I'll have more to say about that in a few minutes.

But, before we let our minds wander off somewhere, Jesus reminds us in the Gospel that it is by design that we can't grasp what "Kingdom of God" means.

It's by design that we can't lay hold of it. Jesus came to reveal the Kingdom of God, but not in a scientific, linear way. We see Jesus perform miracles, heal and cast out demons. He did do those things, but they were not the purpose of his coming. They were signs of his purpose. Jesus came to bring the kingdom of God, and to reveal its presence in the world. We can't exactly lay claim on the Kingdom—it is for the Kingdom to lay claim on us. Jesus' invitation to us is to let ourselves be grasped by it, immersed in it, surprised by it, inhabited by it, even seduced by it in such a way that its mystery pervades our very lives.

The way Jesus sheds light on the notion of the Kingdom of God is by telling stories called parables. We know this. Parables are so familiar to us that sometimes we think we've heard it all before, or that we have tamed them. But parables can never be tamed or be made to read like an explanation of what is, ultimately, a wonderful mystery. In a parable, there is always something that escapes us. Their similes and metaphors point to the presence of the Kingdom of God and of its coming or in-breaking into our lives, but they don't make things clearer or more obvious. Something of a mystery always remains.

Jesus speaks about the Kingdom of God in ways that surprise, confuse or exasperate us, leaving us wondering how to understand what he's talking about. St. Mark explains, "he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples." Yet the disciples didn't really understand even when Jesus explained things to them privately. They couldn't. Jesus's way of being the Messiah was completely different from what they expected. None of them really understood until Jesus had died on the Cross, risen, and was ascended, sending them into the world to continue spreading the Good News.

This morning the parables come in the form of seeds—seeds that grow, we know not how, and tiny mustard seeds that become trees in whose shade the birds take shelter. These two parables are almost boring. Seeds do what they are supposed to do: they grow. They grow almost imperceptibly, until they produce the awaited fruit. The gardener has to be patient. No amount of desiring to see the fruit will make it appear ahead of its own natural schedule. Something small and insignificant will eventually turn into something noticeable and normal. It's interesting that Jesus doesn't like the Kingdom to a

cedar of Lebanon—that great and stately tree—but to an ordinary bush of the garden variety.

The implications for us are just as surprising as they are wonderful.

1. the Kingdom of God is everywhere on earth. It is not reserved to another time and place we can only dream of. It's not about heaven. It's about earth. It's not just about some distant future. It's about now, here, everywhere, for us, for everyone.
2. It will appear without our having done anything. The Kingdom of God has always been in our midst. Our discovery of its presence won't make it any more present. When we recognize the Kingdom of God in our midst, it will simply allow us to appreciate it and be thankful.
3. The sower is God, not us. We are not the ones responsible for entering other people's gardens to sow the seed. God is doing that already. The seed is already present throughout the earth.
4. The seed that is sown is Jesus.

So, if we are neither the sower nor the seed, what are we to do? What part of these parables is about us? What is *our* role in it all? Well, we know what it is not: we are not the builders of the Kingdom. Like seeds, the Kingdom grows on its own, we know not how. Jesus invites us to join him in his mission. He is the seed that grows in all places at all times. The seed grows without our doing anything. Mark says the sower “would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.” The Kingdom is growing while we are doing our normal, everyday stuff, like getting up and going to bed every day, doing the laundry and going shopping and getting ourselves to and from work. It grows even when we are worried about global politics and corruption. It grows while we are worried about ourselves or our families or our friends or our colleagues or our fellow-humans. The Kingdom of God is sown as the smallest of seeds, and it takes root in a hostile world and flourishes, despite evidence to the contrary.

The image of branches large enough to offer shelter is found in tree parables throughout the Hebrew Bible. It is a metaphor for political sovereignty in the shadow of oppressive imperial might. It is God's sovereignty, however hidden or slow it is to show itself—God's sovereignty at work, and mightily so, even when we can't see it.

While such words of hope don't tell us how we are supposed to proceed when faced with the seemingly overwhelming problems we face personally, politically, socially, racially, or economically, they *do* give us assurance that it's worth holding onto hope. It's worth waiting for the Kingdom. It's worth holding out and persevering like a bird watcher in pursuit of a rare bird, waiting patiently and attentively so that we can catch a glimpse—glimpses of the Kingdom of God in the stuff of our daily lives. It's worth exclaiming, "there it is" every time we spot it. Every time we experience God's grace or see signs of God's love, the Kingdom is sprouting. This is the Good News. Jesus is sprouting up everywhere!

It's worth believing that our suffering will not have the last word. It's worth believing that addictive distractions are not what brings us wholeness or meaning or even relief from our suffering. Only love can do that. It's worth holding on to hope in the face of despair, no matter how low we've been brought.. Only God's determined choice to plant the seeds of the Kingdom in our lives can counter our feelings of dissatisfaction, disappointment, or defeat. Only love—love that has been sown in our lives and in our world by our loving God can give us meaning and purpose and fulfillment. And that love will grow as steadily and as surely as the seed that is sown grows in the earth. Our job is to point it out every time it becomes visible. This is what it means to "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation."