

God at Work While We Sleep

Աստուած Կը Գործէ Մինչ կը Քնանանք

Mark 4:26-34

They say one's muscles grow not during exercise, but during the rest. While studying the 10 Commandments, I have emphasized this point saying: **"Sabbath, Shabbath! Stop, rest and learn to trust God.** He is doing miracles in our lives. But, stop and pay attention to Him. Whoever has ears let him hear what Jesus is saying."

Before the Holy Week, when we were studying the Gospel according to Mark, I explained why Jesus started teaching with the use of parables. He was doing it for **two reasons**, I think.

-First, he wanted to announce that Kingdom of God is here. However, this announcement would be very dangerous. Therefore, he used parables as cryptic metaphors dense with meaning. Why? Jesus was surrounded by a hostile environment, with such people as King Herod, Jewish zealots, and the Romans.

-The second reason is that **Jesus wanted full attention from us**, his disciples, the "inner circle." The kingdom of God is announced under the veil, and whoever has an ear, meaning full attention, will get it. This is not a game. This is not a puzzle that clever people can solve while the rest stay in darkness.

This is God's grace given to all of us, if we are ready to receive it.

"To understand them (parables) requires more than intellectual comprehension, it requires submission to the word in one's heart."¹

The truth of Jesus is put on a lamp stand. It is there, do you see it? Once we see it; we are be ignited **with the fire of Love.**

One more reminder from previous sermon the Parable of the Sower, God is approaching humanity through His Son Jesus. "Jesus" is like a farmer, sowing seeds within us. He is not a politician, or a military person coming to accomplish his mission with a sword. He is coming with a **sack of seeds** and he is throwing them on the field. Some of these seeds give results, and some do not. So what's next? Jesus continues with the parable of the man and the

growing seed (4:26-29). He knows that the disciples are wondering about what is happening. So Jesus has some answers.

Here is the title of my sermon: God is at Work while we sleep

We find two parables:

1. The parable of the man and growing seed (4:26-29)

And he said, “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself (*automate*), first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.” (Mark 4:26-29 ESV)

Jesus used many metaphors **from the Old Testament**; Jesus is focused on the good soil and on the good outcome:

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” (Isaiah 55:10-11 ESV)

“Yes, Badveli, we hear it. We hear that when the seed is planted it will not be in vain. It will give results.”

Let me ask you, do we really believe in this statement?

We strive, we plan, and we think we are in charge of the ministry and our lives. But as you will see in the Parable of the man and the growing seed, Jesus has a different message for us.

Four lessons from the first parable:

First lesson:

Patience:

“The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear...then the harvest.”

There is a natural cycle for the seed to die in the ground and grow. In the same way, there is a “divine” rhythm or a divine cycle in the Kingdom of God. There is a cycle, a rhythm. **The farmer does not rush.**

The parable encourages us to wait patiently and find out how the Kingdom of God is developing, growing.

James says:

Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. (James 5:7-8 ESV)

Second lesson:

The growth is happening while the man is sleeping. **This means he is not responsible for the growth.** In fact, it is a mystery for him, says the Bible. (“He knows not how”). So there is a distance between the growth and the man. Man is not in control of the seed. There is a mystery here; he wonders and stands in awe.

The earth produces by itself (*automate*), some translate “**without visible cause**”, “**incomprehensibly**”, or “**effected by God.**” because pious Jews considered the growth of plants to be the wondrous work of God, not simply the result of a law of nature.²

Third Lesson:

“The germination of the seed and its transforming growth is unrelated to the farmer’s ability, activity, or wisdom.”

How humbling and how comforting this concept. The farmer is unable to effect the process.

“The growth leading to the harvest comes from God and takes place because of the **seed’s inherent power, independent of human resources,** aid, or force. It may convey that the kingdom of God is “unstoppable by human unbelief and unhelped by human effort.” Humans can only respond when it invades their life.³

Fourth lesson:

The Kingdom of God is hidden, and it is hidden from so many. Things are happening underground, and in His time they will become visible.

For me, the idea of going to sleep so that the mystery of God's work will happen was very new in this parable. It hit me suddenly and reminded me one more time who is in control. I was silent and I could not write my sermon for a while.

The second parable further makes this point.

2. The parable of the mustard seed:

And he said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."(Mark 4:30-32 ESV)

God can transform a tiny speck of mustard seed into a six-to-ten-foot-high shrub (Mark 4:32; in Matthew and Luke it becomes a tree).

"What God will accomplish through the death and resurrection of Jesus will be just as extraordinary. The tiniest of seeds grows into the greatest of shrubs, and how this happens is veiled in mystery."⁴

The Kingdom of God is here with us. The Kingdom of God is at work; it is a mystery how God works, but it is a reality. Mark says from the beginning:

"The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Mark 1:1

The mustard seed is a small thing, and no eye can see it easily. Yet that small seed is in the soil and eventually it will grow and become a tree with huge branches so that birds can make their nests on it. Some commentaries say that the birds nesting on the branches represents all nations coming under this big tree. Maybe so, but the point is clear. **While we are at sleep, God is at work, bringing forth His Kingdom;** and all nations will come to Him one day. There is a harvest and a judgment day.

What can we learn?

1. We should never give up from spreading the seed.

The parables emphasize the hiddenness of the kingdom of God. It requires spiritual eyes, spiritual discernment, that is given only by God. Only when

you receive that kind of vision you don't ask for proof if God is doing its work; you trust that God is at work when you are "in your sleep" (sleep not in laziness).

I am careful about not overemphasizing the results.

How many converts? How large is your congregation? Where is the youth? How many Bible studies? Mission trips?

All these are important topics in our church. They should not be the way to evaluate the Kingdom of God. I need to be careful not to interpret from a triumphalist perceptive. I mean, look little mustard seed gives huge results. 12 disciples, how about today? The church is all over the world. Yes, but this is about the Kingdom of God. And no one can measure the Kingdom of God with empirical measurements.

The task of the man was to throw the seed. There will be all kinds of soil. That is not our task. Spread the seed, and do not give up. Therefore there should be deliberate work on our side.

I encourage you always that as PACC we should use all means possible to spread the seed. GFLC, Merchant Luncheon, Harvest Banquet, choir, picnic, VBS, making one-on-one friendship with people, exercising with them, eating with them... any means.

Peter says:

"since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever." (1 Peter 1:23-25)

Everything will die. Everything will go away, but HIS WORD, the SEED will not disappear. Therefore we should not stop from spreading and throwing the seed.

2. We who sow the seed must learn to go to bed.

In Genesis God wanted to create Eve, something happened. What was that?

So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. (Genesis 2:21)

We must “go to sleep” so that God will do His work with the seed so it will germinate and sprout. We need to trust God. Many times we act like restless, anxious farmers. We need to learn that we are not in control, and stop controlling things.

God is working in amazing ways.

After many years in Ainjar, I was back to Beirut serving another church. One day our doorbell was ringing. A young man, nice looking, in his hands some baklava from Hallab the best pastry in Tripoli.

“Hi Badveli Nerses, my name is (for security reason I will call him Ahmad, not his real name) Do you remember me?”

I greeted him, but after a short pause ... my Lord, I knew him. He was a young boy in the boarding department of the Ainjar school. I remembered his story. His mother was an Armenian married to a Muslim man from Tripoli, Lebanon. They had many children, but I knew about his sister and him. The two came to Ainjar, barely speaking any Armenian. The Ainjar school educated them. But not only education, also they **learned about Jesus**. Finally, they went back to their home without graduating from High School. After many years “Ahmad” is back to my home. **He wants to thank me**. He came secretly to say, he was a Christian and he would stay Christian whatever happened. He told me his story. He lives in Tripoli with his brother who is a devoted Muslim. They run a bakery. “Ahmad” reads his Bible secretly every day. In fact, the Bible is hidden under a colored cover. He reads the Bible in Armenian at night when everyone goes to bed. He wanted to remind himself that he is an Armenian and a Christian.

He is back to tell me how much he loves Jesus; he is back to me to thank me for leading him to Christ. Although on the surface he is a Muslim but he is a Christian in his heart.... I did not have any idea that all these happened in his life.

**“Listen to my words, LORD,
consider my lament.
Hear my cry for help,
my King and my God,
for to you I pray.**

**In the morning, LORD, you hear my voice;
in the morning I lay my requests before you
and wait expectantly. (Psalm 5:1-3)**

“I want results now.” That will not work with the Lord. We pray, we plan, we serve, we study, we preach, we work, and most importantly we wait expectantly, with anticipation.

Amen

1. David E. Garland, *The NIV Application Commentary*, Mark P 181
2. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Last Days*, 439. Nils Dahl (“The Parables of Growth,” in *Jesus in the Memory of the Early Church* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976], 147) writes: “To Jews and Christians organic growth was but the other side of the creative work of God who alone gives growth.” From NIV commentary Mark, P 176
3. David E. Garland, *The NIV Application Commentary*, Mark P 178
4. *ibid* 180