

2 Corinthians 5:6-17

Mark 4:26-34

“The Two Same Sides of Welcome”

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If you were listening to the gospel reading, then this is one of those moments when you have to wonder what Jesus isn't telling us. Mark records that when speaking to people, Jesus used parables, because parables are something people are able to hear. I find that kind of funny, because did you ever listen to Jesus tell a parable? We heard him tell one just a moment ago: the parable of the mustard seed.

“The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. It's thrown upon the ground—this little tiny seed—yet it grows up to become a great big shrub, branches sticking out in every direction, so that the birds can make nests in it and find shade. The kingdom of God is like that.”

Like what? Like the seed? Like the person who throws down the seed? Like the tree? Like the tree branches, or maybe like the birds? What is the kingdom of God like, Jesus? If we are to live in the kingdom, could you be a bit more specific about where it is, what it's like, and how to get there?

Mark says that Jesus spoke in parables to make it easier for people to understand him, and that when he was finished telling a parable he would often conclude with the words, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen.” Except it's a little hard to know what exactly we're supposed to be listening for. With Jesus, it always feels a bit like a cliffhanger, like there must be something more, something he isn't telling us. And we know there is, because just after telling us that Jesus spoke to the people only in parables, Mark says, but in private with his disciples, he explained everything. Which has really got to make you wonder. What's Jesus doing telling stories that not everyone can understand? Doesn't Jesus want everyone—the young and the old, the educated and the uneducated—doesn't Jesus want everyone to have access to him and the kingdom of God? So, what's Jesus doing giving explanation of his parables only to a select group of insiders? What preacher stands up on a Sunday morning and delivers the sermon to a crowd of thousands and then after church says to his friends at the door, “Listen, meet me in the parking lot in an hour and I'll give you the real scoop.” The arrogance, the exclusivity. It's really got to make you wonder about Jesus. What ever happened to, “Come to me *all* who are weary and carrying heavy

burdens?” Maybe by “all” Jesus meant only those who can still carry the weight of their own troubles.

“Listen, if you need a little cheering up, a one-hour counseling session once-a-month, then come to me. But don’t come to me if you’re a complete and total mess. Don’t come to me if I’m going to have to come up with all the answers for your problems.”

But sometimes, when you’re in the dark and without a flashlight for a really long time—when it’s an addiction that your father had before you, when it’s cancer that just won’t go away for good, when it’s depression or anxiety—it doesn’t help for someone to come along and tell you to pull it together, to take control, because if you could do that you would have done it a long time ago. In those moments, it doesn’t help for someone to say, “You know what you need?” Because in those moments what you need probably isn’t available to you, so you have to go with what you want, and what you want is for someone to acknowledge with you how scary life has become and how vulnerable and afraid you must feel. Cliché stories about seeds and the kingdom of God, for as nice as they are, never feel like quite enough. So you have to wonder then, why does Jesus settle for the cliché? Mark tells us just a chapter ago that all around him are scared and vulnerable people. They have come across the miles, some having to be carried on stretchers, others carrying their diseased children. They are terrified by the way life has turned out and even more terrified to think that it might never be any different. They’ve already been to see the doctor, but the doctor told them it was hopeless and that they should go see the priest. So they went to see the priest but the priest told them to get out, that their suffering was a well-deserving punishment for some mortal sin they must have committed. Now they’ve come to see Jesus, not so much looking to be healed, just looking not to be called crazy or damned, just looking for someone who will acknowledge with them how scary life has become and how afraid and vulnerable they must truly feel. Instead, Jesus tells them some story about mustard seeds before he slips away to have a private moment with his disciples and to explain everything.

“Well, thanks a lot Jesus. Nice story. Maybe someday the rest of us will get to find out what it means and then we won’t feel so afraid...and vulnerable...and left-out.”

I’ll tell you, I’ve been reading my Bible ever since I was old enough to read, and I’ve been coming to church since before that, but sometimes, when I could really stand for Jesus

to give me a sign that he's right beside me, it feels like he's nowhere to be found. You ever feel that way about Jesus?

In recent months, I've been turned on to the writing and thinking of Brene Brown, who is a research professor in the Social Work Department at the University of Houston. She reminds us that being afraid and vulnerable is central to our ability to be human, and that when we lose our capacity for vulnerability, we become protective. Not wanting to be known, not wanting to let others see the frayed and damaged parts of who we are, we arm ourselves against anyone and everything that feels like a threat to our personal comfort and safety. In short, says Brown, we pull away from one another and we become dangerous. And the irony is, the more we pull away from one another, the more dangerous we become to one another. Because it will always be our natural tendency to fear and fight what we do not know.¹

I've been listening in this past week to the news stories about the separation of children and parents at our southern border. I've seen the pictures and like you, I heard our Attorney General quote the Bible as justification for these actions on the part of our government and as explanation for why we ought to support it, and like you, I could give a strong position on the matter. But it's not a position I've been thinking about this week—mine, yours, or anyone else's. What I've been thinking about is what our positions say about our fears. For what does it say about us that when we open our Bibles we turn to the one page where it talks about protecting ourselves from one another rather than to every other page where it says to welcome and love one another? And what does it say about us that we are more concerned with having to face the refugee than we are with what the refugee is having to face? And tell me what it says about us that when the migrant worker comes to try and cross our borders illegally, we think first about what it's going to cost us than we do about what it must have cost them to have already come this far? When it comes to the great political debates of our time, they will not be decided by how well we made our case, but by the courage of our compassion in the face of our fears.

¹ Excerpted thoughts from her interview from “*On Being with Krista Tippett*,” recorded on 2/18/18 and available at www.onbeing.org.

I am reminded of what the French philosopher and sociologist Emile Durkheim said about times like these. He said that what is required is for us to reclaim our collective effervescence. Collective effervescence. It means to join together in shared emotion, to create opportunities that will provide us with a greater experience of mutual compassion and joy. What's required is that we build and nurture places where we can see once again how we belong to one another, because again, Brene Brown, if we walk through this world looking for confirmation that we don't belong, we are going to find out.² So let us give one another a different kind of discovery.

In this hard, hard world, it's not as hard to do as we might think. We all remember the stories that came out of Houston last year following the devastations of Hurricane Harvey, and the pictures of total strangers driving their boats up and down the flooded streets, rescuing people from drowning rooftops, and I'd be willing to bet that at no time did anyone ask who anyone voted for. That's collective effervescence: compassion in the face of shared fear and pain.

But we know that compassion shouldn't have to require that we suffer first. I absolutely love the story that Brene shares about being in Houston last fall when the Astros were in the World Series. It was nearing the end of the ninth, tied game, and everyone was sort of holding their breath to see if their team could pull out a win, when she reaches over and slides her hand into her husband's back pocket. You know, she was in the moment, feeling the love, when she heard someone say to her, "Excuse me ma'am." And that's when she realized her husband had gotten up to go to the bathroom and she was holding on to someone else's rear end. The man looked at her, shrugged his shoulders, smiled and said, "Go Astros."

Collective joy. It's what we're doing this summer with our children in the newly created Worship Workshop. We're coming together with them 6 or 7 times just to play, just to interact through laughter and the mutual love of blowing bubbles and drawing pictures with sidewalk chalk. Because what could be more holy to Sunday mornings and to God than this kind of joy?

² Ibid.

Mark records that when Jesus saw the crowd of people coming on their stretchers, sick and dying, he told them a story about mustard seeds and the kingdom of God, and then he stepped away to be with his disciples and to explain everything. I've been thinking all week about what Jesus must have said to his disciples. What was it that he had to explain to them? Mark doesn't tell us. But I think the conversation must have gone something like this: "Listen fellas, you see all these people who have come to us? They've barely got a hope in the world. They're vulnerable and afraid, and if they make you afraid, there's something I need to explain to you: that means we are no different from them. We are all the same. Welcome them and their fears as if you are being welcomed yourself. In so doing many people have welcomed God." Amen.