

Jesus taught about the reign (kingdom) of God by using parables. Parables are more than stories in that they challenge the listeners' human point of view with Jesus' perspective on the nature of God. Parables stretch our imagination and stimulate rather than soothe our brains. Biblical scholar Megan McKenna explains: *A parable is an experience of an alternative reality, almost like a trapdoor into another world. Once there, you can see what it's like and then decide to stay or to leave, to return permanently or to dismiss that other world and reject the storyteller. The story assumes that the listener is open to another possibility, another way of seeing reality.* Today's scripture readings feature two seed parables of Jesus. In the first Jesus conveys his faith in the hidden, automatic power of God to bring fullness of life into earth. In the mustard seed parable Jesus promises that just a little faith in God's perspective on reality will make something small into something great (Sermon Seeds, June 14, UCC.org.).

Mark 4:26-34

He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come." He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." With many such parables he spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

"Faith's Advantage"

In old age they still produce fruit;
they are always green and full of sap,
showing that God is upright.

(psalm 92:14)

Finite human beings have the innate ability to be thankful and awed in the Presence of Infinite Mystery. Spiritual writer Michaela Bruzzese suggests that we are able to have this positive response even as we live as powerless creatures in the unexplainable cycle of life. In *By Faith, Not Sight* she tells this story: *Every fourth generation, the monarch butterfly returns to ancestral breeding grounds in Mexico from as far away as Canada. The butterflies travel more than 2,000 miles to a place they have never seen, arriving by the millions. Scientists don't understand how or why it happens; they are awed by the mystery, which seems to most the appropriate response. Neither do the Tarasco people of Angangueo, where the butterflies arrive. They simply receive them as the spirits of their ancestors, grateful for the visit* (Sojourners, June 2009 p. 48). From my own experience I know that this positive response to Infinite Creative Mystery is possible because of another one of our innate gifts . . . faith. In this story, when the imaginative people opened their minds to the unexplainable return of the Monarch to their ancestral grounds they were able to believe that the Monarch Beauties were more than butterflies. When imaginative souls opened their hearts to an Infinite Power that causes life to flourish they were able to believe that the spirits of their ancestors had come to visit them. Faith gave them the spiritual advantage of knowing that they were never alone.

Just as the gift of faith can shape our positive response to Infinite Mystery in the birthing of new beginnings, faith can shape a positive response in our endings. Jewish mystic Martin Buber helps us wonder about this through the telling of this story: *After the (leader's) death, his disciples came together and talked about the things he had done. When it*

was Rabbi Schneur Zalman's turn, he asked them: "Do you know why our master went to the pond every day at dawn and stayed there for a little while before coming home again?" They did not know why. Rabbi Zalman continued: "He was learning the song with which the frogs praise God. It takes a very long time to learn that song (Imaging the Word, Year C, p. 214)

When the rabbi learned to praise God he had faith's advantage of knowing that change is transformation, not irretrievable loss.

Comedian Woody Allen gave the best explanation that I have ever heard about why it takes human beings a very long time to praise God. Allen joked: I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve immortality through not dying (Humor, p.87).

One day someone in the crowd asked Jesus about the advantages that faith could give them in their anxieties in the ordinary events of daily living---between their beginning and their ending. In response Jesus told them two parables about seeds. With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds of earth: yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade. To those minds open to Infinite Mystery this parable may have helped the crowd wonder about a God who sees to it that even the smallest of creatures get safety, goodness, and protection. To those hearts open to Infinite Mystery this parable may have conveyed the faith that GOD WILL BE GOD and may have given the confidence to pray that God's will be done: *In longed-for reconciliation within families and among friends, in healing from illness and grief, in the decisions by community that places its most vulnerable members at the top of its agenda rather than at the bottom, in sharing and celebration and the release of grudges, in the end of war and the seeking of peace, in the breaking of bread and the nourishment of our souls and our bodies, in giving voice to the voiceless and lifting up the hopes of those in despair* (UCC Samuel, June 14, 2009).

The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. In hearts open to Infinite Mystery this parable may have caused some in the crowd to wonder about a GOD WHO IS IN CHARGE. When commenting on this faith Biblical scholars have noted: *It's difficult indeed to know the ways of God, so often hidden from view or not detected (or noticed) by us, but nevertheless at work always and everywhere, bringing about God's will in unexpected and marvelous ways. . . We live not so much in optimism that thinks we can fix everything but out of the hope that God is in charge of everything, and we are simply called to participate in what God is doing in the world* (UCC Samuel, June 14, 2009).

One day John Newton (1725-1807) captain of a slave ship during the height of the African slave trade was surprised by Jesus' GOD IN CHARGE, GOD WILL BE GOD. Awed by this Infinite Mystery he gave thanks for God who frees the oppressed and praised God for lifting up the powerless. Most of all he was surprised by the transforming power of faith to his inner nature and outward behavior. In his encounter with the living God he gave up the slave trade and became a minister to participate in what God was doing in the world. He wrote the evangelical hymn "Amazing Grace."
(Imaging the Word, Year B, p. 215).

In the Kingdom of God the miracle of transformation happens when we open ourselves to Infinite Mystery with awe, thanksgiving, praise, courage, and confidence. Faith's hope is that: In old age (we) still produce fruit, (we) are always green and full of sap, showing that God is upright. May God bless us as we pray with Jesus--**thy kingdom come they will be done on earth as is in heaven**---and as we become active participants in what God is doing in the world to bring in Infinite Life.