

Flannery O'Connor, the great 20th-century American novelist and writer was once asked about one of her short stories. A journalist came up and said, "Ms. O'Connor, can you just summarize this story in one particular line or statement?" To which she responded, "If I could put the meaning of the story into one sentence, I wouldn't have had to write the story." Which is a pretty good response. Later on, as she talked about how profound narrative and story are, she wrote,

A story is a way to say something that can't be said in any other way. And it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is. You tell a story because a statement would be inadequate. When anybody asks what a story is about, the only proper thing to tell him is to read the story. The meaning of fiction is not abstract meaning but experienced meaning. And the purpose of making statements about the meaning of a story is only to help you experience that meaning more fully.

See what O'Connor's getting at is this idea that story and narrative have a way of getting at us, at our soul, and expounding upon the depths of a particular topic or truth in a different light. Think about the example of me asking about your spouse or your child. If I asked you to tell me in one sentence all that that person means to you; my guess is you would probably start with a few characteristics and then descend into stories to make that point.

Tomorrow, Lindsay and I celebrate 13 years of marriage. If you were to ask me to summarize our relationship in one sentence, there's no chance that I could do it. I would tell stories. I would elaborate on the highs and the lows of what we've been through. The same is true, I think, with what O'Connor is saying and what Jesus is doing.

We're in the midst of chapter 4, where Jesus is telling these parables, because we find out early on in the Gospel of Mark that the main thesis and point of Jesus' arrival is that the Kingdom of heaven is here, and he says, "*Repent and believe the good news.*" But then, for a few chapters, we really don't get much more explanation of what the Kingdom of God is or its implications. What we get are stories. We hear stories of religious leaders being confronted by their misconceptions. We see stories of people coming to Jesus and encountering him, walking away, and leaving different.

And then when we finally get to chapter 4, we get this series, this long section in which Jesus is finally explaining the Kingdom of God, but he doesn't do it with a statement. He just begins to tell stories. I often hear people ask why wouldn't Jesus just tell us in one sentence: What is the Kingdom of God? Why not just communicate to us like we're Americans—short, small, and efficient? Just give us the nugget. But

Jesus refuses because I think he's getting to the point that the Kingdom of God is far more profound. Its implications are far vaster. And so, to understand the Kingdom of God, we get these stories.

This is what I mean: "*Again he said, 'What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it?'*" (Mark 4:30). He's doing the same thing. He's telling these stories. There's a farmer, and he's throwing seed out on these four different kinds of soils, and one has thorns and rocks and a hardened path, but one's good. And that soil receives the good news. It receives the seed. He says it's like a mustard seed. It's small. There's something about it that grows and flourishes into something more. You see, Jesus was a storyteller, not because he was cute and pithy, but because he understood the complexity of the Kingdom of God. And the only way to get at it is through the story, which is why the majority of our Bible and scriptures aren't necessarily lectures—they're stories. The scriptures—Genesis to Revelation—are a story. It's a story about God; it's the story of God and his people and what he's doing to reconcile and redeem his people.

So when we come to this text today, we see a couple of stories. And if I'm honest, I hope you actually leave with a few more questions than answers because Jesus wasn't really all that concerned with clear answers. He would often teach in a way that would leave you wondering, so much so that 2000 years later, people are still gathering in rooms like this to talk about his teachings. There's something about this Kingdom of God that provokes us, that draws us into its narrative to understand the role that we play, to understand where we land in this, to understand the way Jesus is connecting with us.

I'll give you a little bit of a framework to hold onto as we go through these stories, but what we'll see in Mark 4:21-25 is Jesus expounding on the understanding of the Kingdom. Remember, he just talked about the soils. He was describing it to the disciples, and he's continuing on in that dialogue, talking about how we come to understand the Kingdom of God. Then in verses 26 to 29, we're going to see the operating principle of the Kingdom of God. And again, don't get too caught up in the mechanics of a statement like that. He does it through the story. And in verses 30 through 34, we're going to see the inevitability of the Kingdom of God. We're going to see the way that it is going and growing throughout the world—inevitably. It is an inevitable reality that the Kingdom of God is expanding.

He said to them, "Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear. Mark 4:21-23

Remember, he's already talked about this story of the soils, where he's dealing with how are we listening to the message. And the disciples are asking similar questions that we would like to ask Jesus. What do you mean by all this? What do you mean by these soils? What's the intention of all those things? There's an accusation in there that Jesus is trying to hide his message.

He tells a story here that would've been very familiar to them. Think of a world without lights and all these sorts of things that we have now. The way you would illuminate a room then is through a candle. And he says, do you light a candle and then bring it into the room to cover it up? Is that the purpose of it? Do you light it to put it under your bed? It's hopefully a largely rhetorical question. Of course, you don't light a candle and bring it into a room just to block its light. He says the very intention of lighting a candle is to cast its light across the room. It's to bring into the light all that is in the dark. He says, "Why would I preach this message so people couldn't understand?" What's hidden is meant to be exposed. Do you put it under a bowl or in a bed? No, you put it on its stand.

If you remember, back a couple of weeks ago, we talked about how Jesus, in the parable of the soils, was talking about the mystery of the Kingdom of Heaven. And what we talked about is how the mystery of the Kingdom of Heaven and the way Jesus talks about it is this sort of counter logic to the world around us. See what Jesus understands at this point that the disciples do not, and what we understand at this point, but the disciples do not, is that the way of the Kingdom of God is a cruciform reality. And what I mean by that is that the crucifixion is the center point of the gospel. It's both the way to the Kingdom of God, and it is the Kingdom of God. So it becomes not only how we are reconciled and redeemed into a relationship with God, but it's also the ethic that we espouse in the world around us. That, when we see this example of Jesus, of laying his life self sacrificially for the sake of others, that becomes the ethic and the very center point of us as a church and us as followers of Jesus. We take on that very ethic.

That is not the ethic of the world around us. There is not a logical conclusion that when you lay your life down, that's actually how you receive life. There's not a self-sacrificial giving, and somehow in there, you find the fullness of life that Jesus portrayed. It's a mystery. It's the foolishness of the world. It's the counter logic that is the Kingdom of God. And Jesus says this counter logic will appear and land on deaf ears. At times. It won't appear to land.

Ultimately, the question we're all asking is a very human question of what is the good life? Going back to Aristotle and Plato, what is the good life? What does it mean to live the good life? Well, we believe in John 10:10 that Jesus says I've come to bring life and life to the fullest. But the reality is that the gospel's full life looks counterintuitive. When he says, it's better to give than to receive. That's a counter logic to the world. When he says, "When you lay down your life, you find your life." That's a counter logic. But if we trust Jesus, he's saying that is the way to the good life. That's life and life to the fullest. We have to rearrange the definitions of what we understand about the good life, and Jesus says it looks radically different. The Kingdom of God looks radically different.

It's this cross-shaped counter life. And then he uses that phrase that we are hopefully becoming familiar with. He says, "If anyone has ears, let him hear." He's saying that if you want to hear this message if you want to understand the mystery of the Kingdom of God, it's not going to be hidden. It's meant to be shared. And there's coming a day where it will be fully expressed—if you have ears to hear, let them hear.

Consider carefully what you hear," he continued. "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. vv. 24-25

He is saying that this counter logic will not make sense to us. There's a way in which we have been disciplined into the logic of this world. And so when he says consider carefully, he's saying that this will be hard for you to understand. It will grind against your natural inclinations. He's saying to listen carefully and consider carefully. There's a sense in which we must be diligent. He wants us to lean in and say that this is a different kind of teaching. How do we understand this counter logic to the Kingdom of God? It's an upside-downness. So he wants us to consider carefully what we hear.

And then he uses this interesting phrase that says, "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more." In Greek, it's actually a little more playful. In a really strict word-for-word translation, it would be, "The measure to which you measure will be measured." Which is like, "What are you talking about, Jesus?" It's another one of those, "Why don't you just tell us?"

We don't really use this idea of measure, but I think it has more of a connotation of understanding. It's like the more you understand, the more you'll understand. It's saying, the more you use it, the more you'll experience it. And notice he says the measure you use. Because it's one thing to understand, to hear, to listen to a sermon, to sit under the teachings of Jesus, and then leave this place. But it's a whole other thing to hear the teachings of Jesus and begin to step into that reality and live it out.

It was Mark Twain who once said, "A man who carries a cat by the tail learns something he can learn in no other way." It's what Jesus is getting at. If you want to understand the Kingdom of God, it is so irrational that you cannot understand it until you begin to live into it. Until you begin to accept in faith and step out into this saying, Maybe it actually is better to give than to receive. Maybe it actually is better to love my enemy than hate them. Maybe I am actually sinful and in need of a savior. Until you begin to live into that reality, your understanding will be diminished.

And Jesus says it's not that it's hidden, but there's a way in which you understand the Kingdom of God by living out the Kingdom of God. And you take on that ethic, the measure to which you use, it will be measured to you. You will grow and grow in your understanding. This makes sense at some level, the idea of the more I step into it, the more I grow makes sense. Map that onto any other experience. It's one thing to read a cookbook, but it's a whole other thing to cook. It's one thing to watch Steph Curry play basketball, but it's a whole other thing to step

on a court and play basketball. This actually does, in some ways, make sense.

But the counter logic is, again, it's going to require us to take up and embody the very life of Jesus, which is challenging, but he says the measure to which you use it will be measured. And then he goes on and says, *"Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them"* (v. 25).

Again, that's a hard teaching. This should be difficult. What does he mean? Does he mean that, like those who have a little bit, it will be scooped up and be gone? Remember who Mark's talking to. Jesus is not going at the beginners of the faith. He's been, in these first few chapters, confronting the religious elites. I don't think he means that you can't be a beginning believer trying to wrestle through and figure this thing out. Because the whole Gospel of Mark, thus far, has been about showing us that those who think they are insiders are actually outsiders. And those who look like outsiders, they're actually the ones on the inside.

See, I think Jesus is saying that if you can't capture this counter logic, the little bit you have will slowly diminish because you're disciplined more into a different logic, a different understanding, a different dynamic of how the world operates. He says, but if you step into the little that you have and you grow more and more, it will grow in you. Your trajectory of life will continue to open up to more understanding of the way of Jesus,

I think this is a good question for all of us. If you were to map your life out over the next ten years, are you growing more into Christlikeness? Are you stagnant or growing away from Christlikeness? It will not be perfect. There will, of course, always be struggle. The disciples are a case in point on this one. They stumbled. They misunderstood, but the trajectory of their faith, the measure to which they used, was being measured back to them. They were beginning to grow in this, to where Peter will go from this stumbling mess of a man to the very corner bedrock of the Church. The measure to which you use will be measured. Those who have they'll be given more. He's not hiding this message.

Here's where it gets really difficult. We can't map onto Jesus our own hopes, dreams, and fears and allow the Kingdom of God to underwrite those things. He says if you approach the Kingdom of God and say, "This is what I think the Kingdom of God should be. This is what the kingdom is about," for your own agenda, you aren't actually entering in and submitting to the teachings of Jesus. You're allowing Jesus to be a sort of hood ornament on your own desires.

See if Jesus hasn't, in some ways, frustrated you. If he hasn't confronted you in the way that you view any aspect of your life, if it's just been kind of easy—like Jesus just seems to always agree with you. May I suggest that you might have created God in your own image? Jesus says it will cause some confusion. It will cause concern and questions. If he's always the one that just reinforces your own ambitions and your own desires and longings, Church, I think we're in a dangerous spot. That's what the disciples and the religious elites did.

They had a perception of what the Messiah would be. They had a perception of what the Kingdom of God would be. And they were constantly confronted with that. What you see in the religious elites is this hardening of heart, where they doubled down on their own ambitions and thoughts. And you see, in the disciples, at times, they'd harden, but they often had a softness to acknowledge that they may be off in their perception. And they had a desire to follow Jesus.

So I think Jesus is presenting to us, as we listen to his teaching, two postures. He's putting side by side, the posture of diligence and the posture of complacency. He's saying that if you are diligently pursuing God if you're seeking and saturating your mind and your imagination in the Kingdom of God and what that could look like, you'll receive more and more. You'll understand this Lordship of Jesus in all of its implications. But if you hear it and you're complacent, it's just going to wither away.

It requires more of you, not out of a shameful—I have to do this to be saved—but to say that if you're going to understand this, you have to step into it. You can't just sit back complacent in it. If you're diligent, that's how you can step in and have a greater understanding of the Kingdom of God. Or you can be complacent, and that will be measured back to you as well.

This is both encouraging and troubling. It's encouraging because there is an openness to the Kingdom of God, but it's troubling because Jesus will ultimately give you what you want—even if it isn't him. And that is troubling because we recognize in us the ways in which our hearts have been malformed or shaped in different directions. And so, we constantly bring those things before Jesus. "Lord heal me, save me from this. I have this twisted desire, this thing which I'm pursuing there. Confront me in my belief in this area." And we constantly are doing that work to bring those things into submission to the Kingdom of God.

If your view of career, money, relationships, sex, politics, leisure, time, family, consumption, and economics, if none of those have been confronted by the Kingdom of God, Church, we're in a different kingdom. He's inviting us to a different way. It'll be hard. It'll be challenging. You'll have to be disciplined out of a particular kingdom and into another one. But Jesus says it's the good life. It ultimately is what your heart is longing for. It's a hard teaching, but then we get to the next parable in verse 26. And I think it's a helpful one that Jesus follows up with.

He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself, the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come." vv. 26-29

Jesus uses familiar language. He just talked about a man throwing seeds, and he says the Kingdom of God is like someone who's just throwing seeds. What happens when you throw seeds is somehow they begin to sprout and grow. We can probably figure out that it takes a little bit of sunlight, a little bit of water, and the soil needs to be in the right

condition. But let's be honest, a tree bursting forth out of a seed is still pretty mysterious.

Like maybe some of you in the pandemic, I took on indoor house plants. Mainly because I'm a millennial, and that's what we did. I didn't go the sourdough route. I went the plant route, and we have this tree that we have affectionately named Frida. This tree that I have, we put it in our front window, and we had no idea what we were doing. I just took it and put it in a pot full of dirt. And I thought, I think that'll work, and it did! The thing just took off. I had no idea what I was doing, and there's some sort of mystery to that. I know it needs light, I know it needs a little bit of water, and I knew to read the tag and buy the one that was indestructible. I think that's what it said on there—but it grows.

Jesus says the Kingdom of God is like a man throwing the seeds. And whether the man sleeps or is awake, it just seems to grow. It just happens. It takes root, and it's slow, and it's tedious, and it happens over time. Whether he's sleeping or he gets up, it just begins to take root.

See, we don't control the growth of the seed, but we do have some sort of role. We're not entirely passive. Our role is, again, kind of bumbling through. Get this kind of soil and pour this kind of water in whatever it is, he says. The reality is though, that we do not grow the Kingdom. That's God's job. He's the one throwing the seed. He's making it happen, and this is liberating for us because out of the hard teaching we just had where we've got to pursue Jesus, seek him out, and have this longing for God. And yes, we do need those things, but God is gracious, and he says that the plant just grows.

The Kingdom of God. It's mysterious. You take a seed, and you bury it in the ground, and it disappears. For a while, it's just there, and it's just doing what a seed does. Then slowly, out of the ground, burst this little blossom. And all of a sudden, the Kingdom of God is taking root. He says it's like a man sowing seed. It happens over time. First the stock, then it's the ear, and then the full grain. And then you harvest it because it's good. Jesus is saying, the Kingdom of God is just happening. It's a truth of the world. It's just reality. The Kingdom of God is growing.

Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It's like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all the seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade. vv. 30-32

He says in the same way you take this mustard seed. It's the smallest of seeds. We know now, in the modern world, it's not the smallest and that the plant that grows from it isn't the largest, but that's not the point. Jesus is not leading a botany lesson. What he's doing is saying is to look at the insignificance of a mustard seed. It's so small. You drop it, and it disappears. You can't even see it. But the potential in that seed is that it will grow and develop to the point in which it becomes the largest of garden plants. The birds can perch in it. They can live in it because it becomes so big.

The Kingdom of God is inevitable. It is here; it is growing. It may look small. It may look more like dying than conquering. It may look like laying your life down before resurrection. He says it's small. It appears insignificant to the logic of the world. But it's coming; it's growing. There will be a day in which all eyes will see and will recognize the Kingdom of God and all of its fullness.

We get these little tastes. Now we get these little snippets of it. It's just like that mustard seed. The Kingdom of God is like this tiny seed that comes, grows, and flourishes. What's the Kingdom of God like? It's like me growing up and watching my dad every single morning with his Bible on the living room chair. He's sitting there. He is reading it, and I'm thinking, man, that guy likes to wake up early. Day after day, I see that.

The Kingdom of God it's like something that seems insignificant. The Kingdom of God is like Lindsay's grandma, Brazo, who's the matriarch of the family and brought faith to her family. A family that didn't know that and lived through turmoil. And she just faithfully tried to figure out this way of Jesus. It's the Kingdom of God taking root.

The Kingdom of God is a thousand pairs of shoes brought in this last week at Summer XP, where kids were knocking on doors saying, "Hey, we have to help kids have shoes." He says the Kingdom of God may seem insignificant, but it's growing. It's the Kingdom of God. It's like that.

The Kingdom of God is like our mission partners in India who are planting churches faithful to the way of Jesus, trying to figure out what the Kingdom of God look like in this context. He says the Kingdom of God is taking root. It's inevitable. It's happening. It will look different. It will require that you approach it differently. But the Kingdom of God is inevitable. It's like that mustard seed. It's like the other seeds that we just throw.

Jesus is saying that the Kingdom of God is happening. But again, don't think that it's just an underwriting of all that we want. It's something altogether different. But that Kingdom is, in fact, here. It will not bring about purely our aspirations and ambitions, but the Kingdom of God is going ahead of us, and not everyone who hears it will understand. Those who have ears will know that it is from death that comes life.

He says the Kingdom of God is coming, and it's a truth that's just hidden in reality. This idea that from death comes life; I mean, your breakfast this morning is an example that something died in order to bring you life. The Kingdom of God is happening. It appears like it's disappearing. It appears like it's gone, and it seems insignificant. But that movement towards Jesus, that one step of faith, that one act of obedience, that's the trajectory. It's the measure to which you use that it will be measured. It's coming. He says, Church step into this. It's available. It's here.

So I think there are two things that we learned from these two stories. And the first is that the Kingdom of God is not something we produce. We don't control it. We control the soil. We can be open to it, but the Kingdom of God is not something that we control. And then, as I've just been saying, the Kingdom of God is inevitable. He says that it is, in fact, coming.

Now think about this, if the Kingdom of God is not something we produce, if it is something that's inevitable, this liberates us from any sacrifice of faithfulness. We do not have to sacrifice faithfulness on the altar of relevance. We do not have to sacrifice faithfulness on the altar of politics. We do not have to sacrifice faithfulness at the altar of self-importance and influence. We do not have to sacrifice faithfulness on the altar of security. We do not have to sacrifice faithfulness on the altar of anything.

Because the Kingdom of God is like a seed. It's thrown, and it grows, and it grows. We don't make it grow. We have no role in that. We just step faithfully into the way of Jesus. We buckle down and say, "Jesus, I want to walk with you step by step." And if we are used by Jesus, my goodness, what a humble act that is. But it's still not bringing about the Kingdom of God.

See if the Kingdom of God is inevitable. If it isn't something we have to produce, then faithfulness is our aim, not fruitfulness. We don't have to produce and have this be this grand thing that happens. But rather, if we humbly walk with Jesus, we allow that to be the Kingdom of God work in us. And at times, it may feel insignificant. At times it may feel small, but Jesus says that's the Kingdom of God. It doesn't make sense. It's counter-logical.

About eight years ago, Lindsay and I took a mission trip with a group. We led a group to Honduras, and we were working with coffee farmers. We are doing vacation Bible school stuff all week at this little village, and building and painting their classrooms—all this great missionary work. And on the last day, as we were packing up the vans. Our trip leader said, "Hey, there's a village that is way out in the middle of nowhere, which I'd love to visit. Like, are you guys up to doing that?"

We were tired. We were exhausted, but we decided to do it. We said, "Let's make it happen." So, we loaded up in this van and traveled through the mountains of Honduras on this road that certainly shouldn't have held a van our size. We're driving through, and we pick up a passenger along the way who is visiting this little tiny village. Village is way too strong of a word. This was almost like just this home. And we turn a corner at one point and pull up. I look, and there's like about a dozen kids just running around, and we see two adults. As I walk up, I see this outhouse that had been boarded up. And we find out that they had filled that outhouse and didn't know what to do. So they boarded it up and built another one. We stepped into this house; this little hut. We learned that just about a year prior, they finally got a floor. It was just dirt before. They were sharing stories about how the house is made of Adobe mud, and when it rained, the walls start to deteriorate so they'd send their kids out to keep patching up the holes on the wall.

You know, I'd been on different mission trips. I've been on a bunch of them to Mexico. I've been in spaces where I was in the inner city and that sort of thing. But this was poverty at a different level than I'd ever

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

seen. I remember looking at these kids, and they were making it, but they certainly didn't look good. And as I sat there and watched this, and I thought about these two parents trying to raise these 12 kids, whether they were all their kids or from the surrounding villages, whatever it was, the categories of God began to break. I was educated and had four years at a Bible university, had all the theology kind of squared away and all that. But when I looked at this family, things began to deteriorate. I began to get a little angry and thought, "Man, this house has 14 people, and it's smaller than my garage." I saw the way they were struggling to survive, and the crops were bad that year. And so they were quite literally just trying to survive.

And as I'm reeling from this, the pastor we brought gathered everybody up, and they went next door to this little tiny church. We're inside this church, and I'm just sitting in the back trying to hold things together. I'm just a bit of a mess at this point, and this pastor gets up with this beat-up old guitar. He goes up front and asks for requests for songs. The kids are just ecstatic. They're excited to just sing and worship. They begin throwing songs out there.

And again, I'm sitting here as the categories are just falling apart of what God is, what this means. What I have and what they don't have and trying to figure all that out. The pastor up front finally takes one of the requests, and the first song the kids want to sing is called Dios está aquí, which means God is here. We listened as these kids began to sing this song. God is here. God is here.

Listen to these lyrics: God is here right now. As certain as the air I breathe surrounds me. As certain as I know, the sun will rise in the morn. As certain as I know, he hears me. When I call holy holy, my heart will adore and praise you. My heart will say what it knows to be true. Holy is our God.

As I sat and I listened to kids cry out on that little tiny farm with everything falling apart and declare Dios está aquí. I realized the Kingdom of God is like a seed so small that it doesn't make sense. But it's there. And the faith of those children and the faith of those parents is profound. They understood the Kingdom of God as I can only dream of because they have this small faith. He says that small faith that seems insignificant, that village, that to our eyes appears like they have nothing. God says, no, no, no. They've found the treasure. They've got it. And we have a lot more to learn from them than to teach them because Dios está aquí, the Kingdom of God, is like a small seed.

It's like a little tiny plant, and it's going to grow. And it's inevitable in its growth. I just wonder if, for us, maybe there's a way in which we framed the gospel according to our own ambitions and our own desires. Jesus is saying, "It's actually looks like you laying your life down." God, give us ears to hear.

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