

*God who speaks to us in parables, help us interpret and apply your Word for our place and time. Amen.*

Quite a while back, I spent a year living in Oregon. It was a significantly different climate zone than we have here, or than I was used to in New England, where I had lived most recently. When summer arrived, I was surprised to discover blackberries growing all over the place.

They were like weeds – you couldn't get rid of them, and they would take over your whole yard once they got started. Plus, the plants were prickly and ugly. They didn't grow into nicely formed bushes. They would spread all over your yard and through your fence and out of your garden into your grassy lawn.

Even so, finding the blackberries was a pleasant surprise to me! They might be annoying, but you wouldn't want to get rid of all of them all. Having fresh berries in your backyard is nice! I enjoyed a lot of blackberries that summer.

The kingdom of God is like a blackberry seed. It gets planted somehow – probably by a passing bird – and before you know it, the seed has sprouted! Then the “bush,” for lack of a better term, starts to take over everything!

You don't love it, but you don't exactly hate it either. Mostly, it's just annoying to have something so out of control.

Mustard was a plant that grew in ancient Palestine without needing any particular cultivation, sort of like those blackberries I found in Oregon.

Mustard had some medicinal value, so you wouldn't want it to disappear entirely.

But you could pretty easily get all the mustard you'd need from already-existing plants.

There would have been no reason for someone to actually plant a mustard seed in their garden, as Jesus suggests in today's parable. His listeners must have been chuckling at the analogy.

The kingdom of God is like a tiny seed that grows into a huge plant that you can't easily get rid of. It might be nice to have around at certain times, but you probably wouldn't plant it intentionally. You'd prefer to let someone else deal with the hassle.

I'm reminded of the mint we had growing outside the apartment where I lived as a young child. I thought it was so cool – who knew that mint was more than a flavor for candy and ice cream? It actually came from a real live plant, and we had that plant growing in our garden! I thought we must be pretty special.

I didn't understand why my mom didn't share my enthusiasm. I mean, she picked the mint and used it in the sun tea that she would make in the summers. But she still didn't seem excited to have it growing there.

Eventually I learned that mint is another one of those plants that just keeps coming back year after year, even after you think you've pulled it all up to make room for other things to grow. Mint has some uses, of course, but my mom certainly hadn't planted it on purpose. She used it in her tea because it was growing anyway. But it wasn't what she really wanted to have in her garden.

The reign of God is like a plant that takes over everything, that you don't necessarily want to have in your garden, but that you have a hard time getting rid of. So you may as well use it, as long as it's there.

The realm of God is messy. It doesn't always show up in the times or places we would expect. Mint in an apartment garden? Blackberries overtaking the yard?

Mustard in a family's garden? But the kingdom of God is there even when it doesn't show up like we have imagined.

Maybe that's the key.

The kingdom of God is out of our control.

God's reign doesn't always show up when you expect, where you expect, in the people you expect, looking like you expect.

God's reign doesn't always have enough money, or clean clothes, or a job, or the right documents, or formal legal representation.

The realm of God is like a blackberry plant that tries to take over your whole yard – and our job is to celebrate its arrival! We may not always want it to be around – we may wish that someone else could deal with the hassle.

But this is how God shows up among us! So, rather than trying to weed out that icky prickly plant – rather than trying to excise whoever or whatever does not conform to our expected societal norms – Jesus calls us to celebrate the arrival of God's reign, even – or especially – in unexpected places!

The birds will love it. And it will have some practical use for us as well. The realm of God is good for all of creation.

Another example: just about anyone who has had children in their lives during a summer has been gifted with a bouquet of dandelions as a sign of love. Kids delight in those invasive weeds that most adults would rather eradicate from their yards.

Some of us have had salads with dandelion leaves in them. They taste pretty good, actually, once you get over the stigma of them being a weed.

A few of us might have even had dandelion tea. While dandelion plants are not anyone's favorite, except perhaps a 4-year-old's, they have some use.

Can you imagine Jesus standing in front of us today and saying, the kingdom of God is like a dandelion seed!

We would laugh. And then we would wonder.

What in the world does he mean?

Hang on. Are we actually supposed to *love* those things that we have been taught to hate? Does God want us to recognize divine presence in ordinary stuff, in places we would not ordinarily look?

Of course.

The motto for the realm of God could be, expect the unexpected!

God's reign is beyond our control.

It is chaotic sometimes, unmanageable, and difficult to live with.

And that is precisely what makes it so meaningful.

When we pray, "your kingdom come," most of the time we don't pause to think about what we are asking for.

Jesus gives us a reminder in today's parable.

"Your kingdom come" means that we need to actively be on the lookout for God's action among us – through the lives of poor people or immigrants, through those people who society prefers would just disappear, but who are not going anywhere any time soon.

"Your kingdom come" means that we need to love our neighbors – even those who are annoying, hard to be around, or with whom we would just rather not associate.

When we pray "your kingdom come," we are asking that God be revealed to us even in ways that we may not like at first.

Because, you see, the realm of God doesn't look, or love, or live, as we would we expect. It's prickly and unpredictable, not warm and fuzzy. It likes different soil and has different needs than we may be used to accommodating. Sometimes it looks unkempt. But the realm of God is totally worth it.

When we remain open to God's Spirit moving in unexpected ways, we will feel the presence of that Spirit so much more often! We will grow closer to God and in deeper relationship with other people and all creation.

And don't forget: Scripture also tells us that the kingdom of God is within you. In our lives and in our relationships, we bring along the possibility of messiness and chaos and the presence of God.

As we recognize God's reign in the lives of others, as we recognize it in various cultures and environments, and even in things like dandelions or mustard plants, other people will be noticing the reign of God in us.

What seeds do we sow in our communities? In our families? In our church? Do we sow grace and love, which are pervasive and overtake everything like a blackberry plant? Do we plant seeds of welcome and hospitality? Do we sow generosity and forgiveness?

If so, we are sowing the seeds of the kingdom – things that will overcome the hatred and fear of the world, if we only allow them to grow.

When we sow justice and kindness, we are living out our prayer: let your kingdom come!

God's reign is unexpected, and sometimes our first reaction is to ignore it – or at least to hope that it will leave us alone. But when we open ourselves to the movement of the Spirit, we will be able to see the presence of God in all kinds of places and people. We will begin to *be* that presence for others.

And this is exactly what Jesus is asking us to do, in his name.

Amen.