



**Disciples Refugee & Immigrant  
WELCOME SUNDAY  
June 16, 2019  
Planning & Worship Resources**



**SERMON BACKGROUND NOTES from Rev. Dr. Sharon Stanley-Rea**

**Sermon #1 Notes:**

Based on Mark 4:26-34

(See also accompanying “Prayer Card” below sermon.)

[Mark 4:26-34—](#)

“The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground,...and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.” (26-27) & “The kingdom of God...is like a mustard seed, which...is the smallest...yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest...so that the birds...can make nests in its shade.” (30-34)

*Intro. to Scripture:* Building on the parable of the sower that opened this whole parable chapter in Mark, today’s passage offers two more agricultural parables about fruit-bearing and sowing on the Kingdom of God. They are not the most well-known of the sowing parables. But they do pack a punch! Eugene Peterson described parables as “narrative time-bombs”; “You hear them-tick-wonder about them-tick-think maybe you’ve got it-tick-and then as you walk away-tick-or over the course of the next days-tick-all of a sudden the truth Jesus meant to convey strikes-Ka-boom!—almost overwhelming you with its implications! Let us listen for God’s voice in MARK 4:26-34 (*Read Scripture.*)

**“SEEK-RET SEEDS”, Mark 4:26-34**

*Sermon:* What is it, I wonder, that makes our blood run faster in your veins and brings an adrenaline push to our heart when we burrow into a hiding place? It seems we start practicing our hiding skills as young children, in the game of “Hide and Seek”; aware that someone is counting out loud before announcing “Ready or not, here I come!,” to track us down like my beagle does a possum across the fence—to expose and sniff us out from our safe spots? Are there any of us here who do NOT remember what it felt like playing “Hide & Seek”? Researchers say it is played in Australia, India, around the world—and perhaps going as far back as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Greek writer Julius Pollex—who named the game “*apodidraskinda*”.

To me, maybe to you, it seemed so fun then, learning such skills, when nothing *really* was at stake. In my life with privilege, I never imagined the ways that well-honed abilities of hiding and seeking could be needed to help so many with literal **skin in the game** to SAVE THEIR LIVES; those for whom the game has turned into *a way of life*; for the more than 65 million displaced persons in the world; the over 22 million—who were pushed to escape out of their country as refugees; ones like my friend Kia, who described how “the littlest would walk backwards as we went in a line at night through the jungle, turned around with a palm branch swirling it on the ground to remove footprints so we wouldn’t be found and shot.”

In my life of safety, I’d not thought when I played Hide & Seek of those **who in their lot** are hearing threats of “Ready or not, HERE I COME” **a whole lot** from people and systems that have failed to offer them protections; like immigrants with **ICE knocking** at the door at 5:30 a.m., like **Mirian’s** 18 month old son, who’d fled violence amid tear gas in Honduras when he—like hundreds of others—was pulled apart from his mom at the border recently; and like **Yeslin from Guatemala**—who is now our neighbor in DC, with her asylum case pending after evading gangs that extorted her family, and now separated with her husband in detention in GA and her Mom held in California. Our DMV Sanctuary Congregations Network will hold a baby shower for her this Tuesday night!

I’d not thought, as I learned to hide, of ones like the women and men who’ve said “**Me, too**” often after too many years of holding silence about the violence they’d experienced, or about the **LGBTQ** sons and daughters whose natural identity

means so many have rejected them. So perhaps in a world where many are living in fear of discovery and retaliation if they admit **WHO** they really are, **WHAT'S** happened to them, the **PAIN** they're feeling, **HOW** they really believe, **THE THOUGHTS** they're really having, the **DOCUMENTATION** they really have or DON'T, it is especially appropriate that Mark provides us with a style of Jesus that speaks himself *in a hidden way* to lift up those whose lives are often *too hidden*.

In fact, it's in vs. 34 of today's passage where Mark unloads that Jesus intends to unfold for his disciples what a kingdom infused with this Good News is like **ONLY through parables**. Theologian **David Lose** has said parables are slow to sink in, confusing, and confounding, **meant to DISRUPT and CONFRONT**—as when Emily Dickinson wrote her poem saying: “Tell all the truth but tell it slant...the Truth's superb surprise...must dazzle gradually, Or everyone will be BLIND!” The word “parable,” Lose reminded, is the combination of PARA, meaning “alongside,” and BOLE, meaning “to throw.” So, to tell a parable was to throw one story beside another to see what happens. Or, we may say, parables are to help us think about how Jesus is ready to **throw down presence** into our lives in a vision of the Kingdom his first audience (or us!) might not expect!!

And so we find, in the first story, a sort of sloppy seed tosser (not a particularly careful farmer) where the person “**ballo**” (in Greek, ‘throws’, rather randomly, not really aiming) the seed on the ground and then doesn't even water, but GOES TO SLEEP...with the result “the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how”--seeming to indicate results and growth **Do not DEPEND** on us; but rather require trust in God's intent and power for life. Although it's not without responsibility (as the person eventually DOES go out and harvest), it's BEYOND OUR CONTROL or power, reminding that faith is “more like falling in love than like making a planned decision.”

I am reminded of the story of Henrietta Lacks, the African American woman whose cells were harvested WITHOUT HER KNOWLEDGE when she was dying of cancer in 1951, and of whom today a portrait hangs in the National Portrait to remember how her cells—though stolen!--were grown for 67 years and have helped develop the AIDS cocktail, polio vaccine, and treatments for hemophilia, herpes, flu, and leukemia. We “know not how”—but GOD DOES and CAN do that—and WILL EQUIP US!! This parable is given witness to in stories like that of Peter, a lost boy of the Sudan, who I met last month, and who described God coming to him without his control. “We left, boys separated from our families, when I was 11. What was my food? It was a tree. It was a leaf. It was mud. We stayed 6 years in Ethiopia, often HIDING TO SEEK safety in the river.” Then as violence encroached, Peter was tragically shot in the face by soldiers...but THEN the Red Cross found me, THEN his injury prioritized him for resettlement, THEN he made his way into a congregation in Kentucky. NOW I HAVE A FAMILY.

God WILL equip, because as the next story rolls from Jesus' lips, he continues to share how **GOD'S LOVE IS PERSISTENT**; as a weed. Theologian John Dominic Crossan says about the mustard seed that it is not so much ‘large’ as it is ‘**invasive**’—(we might say, it finds its hiding places!!) and with shoots that can take over the surrounding area! Those who were NOT Jesus followers must have gotten the point that God's love wasn't sweet and submissive (ready to just take any abuse), but it was/is AGGRESSIVE to grow, SUBVERSIVE to push out the “carefully planted seeds” of the Romans, so that **God's love WILL find ways to win** over any powers of the world intent on their own profits or causing pain! Look at verse 32, it is happening in the PRESENT TIME, there are “s”es on these verbs!—**it grows, it becomes, it puts forth, so birds can make nests** and find a safe, comforting, protective hiding place to LIVE.

On this morning, I can only imagine what this could mean to PRINCE, a Marylander for many years, married to a US Citizen, who was originally from the Central African Republic. Our DMV Sanctuary Congregations are working with him because he was put into detention weeks ago in Glen Burnie, and last Thursday night (without an ability to call his wife), they tried to deport him. He resisted and refused, they beat him, he was eventually returned to Maryland. And he, and WE who'd like to help him, PRAY TO CONTINUE TO FEEL THE MUSTARD SEED'S INVASIVE, ALWAYS PRESENT, GROWING POWER!

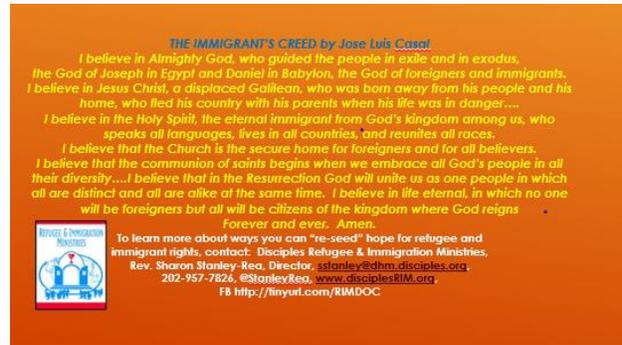
And we pray he is strengthened by how these parables remind us that God's power is MYSTERIOUS. Above ground, it may not even yet be barely visible, but God's power reminds **it is from a seed Underground where life is found**, which offers hope of life to the birds, to others as it grows. In its mystery, we may say God's power is VOLCANIC; perhaps not seen on the surface--but BURSTING WITH LIFE BELOW, it will show in God's time. Josiah Hinson and Harriet Tubman knew the power, near this very area, of the UNDERGROUND Railroad to offer hope in dark times, and as persons

traveled in the dark of night, HIDING TO SEEK safety. And a Dreamer, among the thousands who streamed to the Capitol throughout the Fall till early Spring to give witness to their strengths and need for lasting protection, seemed to know and be seeking that mysterious power of God when—on the “deadline day for a vote,” deeply disappointed with inaction, and standing in front of the Capitol, his shirt silently witnessed through the words of an old Mexican proverb—“They tried to bury us. They didn’t know we were SEEDS.”

With many HIDING, and SEEKING safety and hope, how may we be ready to cooperate with the beyond our control, presently and invasive, often underground but bursting with power, LOVE OF GOD, to become “SEEK-RET SEEDS” of hope?

### HANDOUT INFO/PRAYER CARD

(May be used independently, as a handout on Refugee & Immigrant Welcome Sunday, or in partnership with the above “Seek-ret Seeds” sermon):



### Sermon #2 Notes:

Based on Genesis 18:1-15

The Visit of God & Angels to Abraham and Sarah’s Tent

Anyone raised in the South learns early on what “a ‘lil sumthin’” really means. You don’t dare come to grandma’s house already full—or even having had a snack before arrival—because her in-the-door greeting of “Welcome, and let me just bring you a ‘lil sumthin’” results most often in a full table presentation of green beans, mashed potatoes with gravy, fried chicken, chocolate pie, and enough sweet tea to float you to the ocean! And to refuse to eat what’s offered is also an affront that can lead to family discussions that may leave you wishing you’d never come to visit.

The Old Testament text in today’s lectionary represents two stories that together form a “circle of hospitality.” Verses 1-8 provide a glimpse of Abraham and Sarah in a tent “fully intent” on welcoming guests—and offer a picture of multiple characteristics of hospitality that provide insights about how we are to treat “strangers among us” today. Verses 9-15 portray the reality of God’s identity as One who seeks to embody hospitality far even beyond the bounds of what is considered possible in our human understanding; and calls us to trust in the assurance of God’s blessings and healing beyond our imaginings. Our trust is commanded, and can renew our strength to continue to welcome others. God’s hospitality offered to our lives is no joke...and even more than with a Southern grandma, refusing to accept its power and blessing will leave us stranded in fear that will minimize our capacity to reach out to others.

Abraham’s promise of “a morsel” in verse 5 became even more than Grandma’s best ‘lil sumthin’ Southern spread, as we see him model what hospitality can best look like as he greeted his guests warmly, spoke to them with respect, offered water to drink, asked Sarah to fix them bread cakes, offered to wash dust off their feet, offered the shade of his trees, offered a valuable cow for food, prepared butter and milk to drink, and offered his presence under the tree as they ate. And, throughout all these gestures, we see that Abraham moved quickly—further showing the priority he placed upon meeting the needs of his guests—as the text tells us he “ran...to meet them” (vs. 2), “hurried into the tent” (vs. 6), and “ran to the herd” (vs. 7). Sarah and their young employee likewise “hastened” to prepare the bread and calf. And in verse 16 just beyond our passage, we see that Abraham further carried out a departing act of hospitality, as well, when he accompanied his guests on the start of their journey “to send them on the way.”

By performing every act, Abraham and Sarah were demonstrating the commitment to care for the vulnerable that was expressed through deeply held cultural practices and values during Biblical times in the Middle East. It is worth noting the magnitude of love and respect for the visitors that was shown even through the amount of grain that Abraham asks Sarah to use in her preparations of bread. His “three measures of fine flour” requested was the equivalent to about thirty quarts of flour!! That extravagance could have fed dozens. The calf that Abraham butchered likewise could likely have fed up to a hundred people—a small village! (See Bill T. Arnold’s *Encountering the book of Genesis*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998, p. 100.)

For even more of a background, see the article “Travelers and Strangers: ‘Hospitality’ in the Biblical World” by Dennis Bratcher, available through Christian Resource Institute at: <http://www.crivoice.org/travelers.html>. At Bratcher points out, in ancient times, both travelers and persons who sought to settle permanently outside their homeland were often called “foreigners, strangers, or sojourners” because they didn’t belong to a particular community or group. Hospitality offered protection and acceptance, and built up goodwill to reduce the chance of any hostilities developing between long term residents and newcomers. Hospitality was—and IS—about more than “being kind.” Hospitality always helps to hold our communities together!

In verses 9-15, God then attempts to demonstrate an even greater depth of hospitality to Sarah and Abraham by seeking out Sarah in vs. 9 (when it was cultural practice for wives to be in a separate part of the tent during the meal), by acknowledging her in conversation as a woman beginning in verse 10 (which showed great respect, and was beyond the bounds of typical culture), by promising she would bear a child at her very old age (and remember—Abraham himself was more than 99—as we learned in Chapter 17, verse 1!), and by reassuring her once more in verse 14 of his promise to fulfill the deepest desire of her heart to bear a child.

Sarah would have been strongly aware that travelers were supposed to accept whatever a host offered to them, because to not do so was considered extremely offensive. However, her faith struggled in the passage to see herself as a “traveler/journeyer” before God who so desires to offer love and a relationship to her. Her trust of God could give her what she craved the very most...the ability to conceive and have a child that would provide her warmth and joy, as well as stability, respect, and removal from criticism in the ancient world.

In preaching, we can seek to encourage listeners to model the generous hospitality in our faith tradition, shown through Abraham and Sarah’s welcome. We likewise can encourage listeners to identify with Sarah’s difficulty in believing that “the joy of her heart” could be given her—beyond all human limitations-- by God. We can point out how our lack of faith in God’s identity as one hospitable to us in ways “far beyond our human imagining” threatens to diminish our own hospitality, and perhaps feeds our rhetoric of division and exclusion of refugees, immigrants, and others. To more deeply trust God’s blessings to us can enlarge our hospitality to and acceptance of others. It likewise enhances our nearness to God, and provides God joy as we demonstrate our trust in God’s goodness given to us and intended for all his children.