

Buff Christianity is Weak!  
Mark 4:26-34

Wyoming Baptist Church  
Sunday, June 17, 2018

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, help us to see you in today's scripture. Show us where your Spirit is moving. And then give us the wisdom and the courage to follow. Amen.

Alright, if you had to name your top Father's Day song, what would it be? Come on. I want to see some hands...

Cat's in the Cradle. That's right. Harry Chapin. It's like the quintessential reverse Father's Day song:

My child arrived just the other day  
He came to the world in the usual way  
But there were planes to catch, and bills to pay  
He learned to walk while I was away  
And he was talking 'fore I knew it, and as he grew  
He'd say "I'm gonna be like you, dad"  
"You know I'm gonna be like you."

You know the chorus, right? Sing it with me.

And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon  
Little boy blue and the man in the moon  
"When you coming home, dad?" "I don't know when"  
But we'll get together then,  
You know we'll have a good time then.

I sang that song at my dad's funeral. We would go on vacation, and my dad would put in Harry Chapin or sometimes The Moody Blues, and then he'd turn on the air conditioner. He'd turn it on so high that my mom always brought a sweater. This was Texas...in the middle of July. Man, it was always freezing in there.

My favorite Chapin song was probably 30,000 Pounds of Bananas – I mean, as an 8-year-old riding in a conversion van for sixteen hours on West Texas highways, you don't really have much to do so it's kind of fun imagining an out of control truck full of 30,000 pounds of bananas smashing into some tree. But my dad's favorite Chapin song had to have been Cat's in the Cradle.

My son turned ten just the other day  
He said, thanks for the ball, dad, come on let's play  
Can you teach me to throw, I said, not today  
I got a lot to do, he said, that's okay  
And he walked away, but his smile never dimmed  
It said, I'm gonna be like him, yeah You know I'm gonna be like him.

Man, I wanted to be like my dad...

My dad had this "memory book" that my brother gave him a year or two before he got sick. When I was thinking about what to say at his funeral, I started to flip through that book and found this: It was a few lines hidden in there where my dad talked about some of the most important lessons he learned in life. This is what he said. He said, "People will always be people, not always kind and understanding, but selfish." People will always be people, no always kind and understanding, but selfish. "[But] love," my dad said, "love is the foundation stone of life." And, then he ended things with this: "Time...Time is precious. Use it wisely, and always, always, remember time. It's slow. It's messy. And it seems more interested in small, day-to-day things and in particular people and communities than in "grand arcs of history." If the kingdom of God has come in Jesus, then it has come in the healing of this

demon-possessed guy over here. It's come in the healing of this hemorrhaging woman over there. It's come in just seeing our kids up here singing about peace and joy and love.

And you know what? I know it sounds cliché, but it's come one relationship at a time. I think that cliché actually works. Jesus touches the blind man's eyes. A woman touches his cloak. Jesus eats day-in and day-out with his disciples. We worship together every Sunday. We over and over and over again receive Jesus' body and blood together, from each other, as if from the very hand of Jesus himself...

All the same, I think Cat's in the Cradle also reminds us that we're a bunch of sinners. Last week, we talked about the deep veins of misogyny and masculinist thinking within our churches and our theologies that have come to more and more light over the past few months. And I wondered what we should make of it. The very depth and pervasiveness of this sin just hit me like a ton of bricks. I think that, when we look back, what we see is that that we've been shaped – we've been formed, slowly over time – to think and act this way. He's grown up just like me. He's grown up just like me.

I wondered if everything that was coming to light was maybe the final nail in the church's coffin. I read some articles and blog posts, and you'd think that was actually the case. But, I think not. I hope not, and that's because when I read that public letter denouncing the misogyny and masculinist thinking within our churches, when I listen to the women and they can't help but ask, "Where?" Where's the kingdom, really? Where is it? And how does Jesus respond? Well, he points at people; he points at real people and real lives that have been changed: "Here's the kingdom!" He says in Luke. "Right here. Right here in the midst of you. Don't the blind now see? Don't the lame now walk? Aren't the dead raised? Aren't the poor fed? Don't they have salvation preached to them? Isn't that the kingdom?" And that, I think, is what Cat's in the Cradle does so well. It realizes that growth, that the formation of people, that these things take time – that it's a slow process, but that all the while the son is being shaped. He's being molded. Day-in and day-out, he's becoming more like the father. It's that subtle change in the chorus at the end that does it, and it's brutal:

And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon

Little boy blue and the man in the moon

"When you coming home, son?" "I don't know when"

But we'll get together then, Dad,

You know we'll have a good time then.

Uh. It gets me every time. That's really when you know that he'd grown up just like me, he'd grown up just like me. The song builds – slowly, slowly – but you feel it coming. You can see what's going on behind the scenes. It's the years and years of planes to catch and bills to pay, but the son's learning. He's growing. He's changing. And then surprise! He's grown up just like me.

Of course, that's what scares us to death. We don't want the boy to grow up to be just like his dad. But Chapin noticed something about parenthood that's the same, I think, for the kingdom of God. It's a process, and it takes that your time is most precious and desired by your family." Your time is most precious and desired by your family.

That was the weird thing about Dad liking Cat's in the Cradle. He was the opposite. Maybe it just convicted him or something, and he listened to it as some sort of monastic goad. I don't know. Maybe it was just because it's a really good song.

I've long since retired and my son's moved away

I called him up just the other day

I said, I'd like to see you if you don't mind

He said, I'd love to, dad, if I could find the time

You see, my new job's a hassle, and the kids have the flu

But it's sure nice talking to you, dad

It's been sure nice talking to you...

And as I hung up the phone, it occurred to me

He'd grown up just like me My boy was just like me.

Wow. That's brutal. Someone once asked Harry Chapin what he thought about the song, and he said it scared him to death. When he sang it, he thought about his son, Josh, and it scared him to death. It scared him to death.

It scares me to death, too. Every day I wake up, my kids are like playdough. I'm molding them in my hands by what they see and how I act and what I say and where my loves lie. "People will always be people, not always kind and understanding, but selfish." He'd grown up just like me, my boy was just like me...

3

It scares me to death.

In the Gospel reading for today, Jesus tells us two stories, two parables about what the kingdom of God is like. Let me read them again: "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, and yet he does not know how. The earth produces things by itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once the farmer goes in with his sickle because the harvest has come.

"Jesus told another parable. '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.'"

For the kids' sermon, I talked about these stories being all about "surprise." The kingdom of God is surprising. Sometimes, maybe even most of the time, it just seems to come out of nowhere. All of a sudden you wake up and there it is! All of a sudden, there's a little sprout sticking up out of the dirt. All of a sudden, the littlest seed in the garden becomes the biggest shrub of all. That's the work of God. That's the kingdom. Surprise! But here's the thing. I think these parables are as much about patience as they are about surprise. The farmer sleeps and rises "night and day, night and day." Over and over and over again. It's the rhythm of life. These parables are about being patient and faithful in the day-in and day-out of life. Because why? Because that's how the kingdom works. That's how the kingdom grows – slowly and humbly and yet also so very intentionally.

That said, I think we're often tempted to read these parables as recommending some sort of passivity. We do nothing. God does it all. So, let's just sit back and relax and watch the grass grow. But, that really misses the point, I think. Take a look at 1 Corinthians 3 where Paul talks about the same sort of thing in and puts the idea of passivity to bed: "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God makes it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, the one who makes things grow." That may sound like passivity, but it isn't. Listen to what Paul says next: "The one

who plants and the one who waters have one purpose,” he says, “and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor.” There’s that human activity again. Paul’s back to talking about our activity, our action. God might be the only one who really makes things grow, but we’re still the ones who plant and water. “For we are God’s coworkers,” Paul says to close things out, “and you are God’s field, God’s building.”

So, in these parables in Mark, Jesus isn’t saying that we should just sit back and relax. He’s actually telling us that the kingdom of God is already here – it’s on the scene, it’s growing – but it’s not how we might expect it to look. It’s not immediate. It takes time. It’s slow, but it’s steady. In each and every one of the Gospels, this is the thing that everyone seems to struggle so hard to see. They expect the Messiah to just storm in, guns blazing, riding on the back of some great army. They expect it, I think, to be kind of easy. They see his miracles, they hear him say the kingdom of God has come, but the men of the #MeToo movement tell me how my thinking and my actions are still seeped in this disgusting culture, what I see is that mustard seed. I see the Spirit of God moving through the fields of our world and our lives, slowly but surely. I see change happening. That’s what I see. I see the seed sprouting. I see new life rising up out of the dirt. I see birds nesting. And it gives me hope. It gives me hope because, even though we’ve grown up just like our fathers and our kids have grown up just like us, I see God, and things are growing. Amen.

