

“Church Growth and Kingdom Gardening”

Scripture Reading from Mark 4: 26-34

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Looking at our parables for today, the phrase “how does your garden grow” comes to mind. If I had to give myself a grade for my garden this year it would be generous if I said a C+. Unlike the person in the first parable, I did not scatter the seeds and then forget about them until the harvest. I have watered, fed, and used “Sluggo” with not much progress. I plan to blame my poor results on a cool spring, too much rain etc. Thinking I needed to brush up on gardening, I looked at some gardening quizzes. A short one is in your bulletin insert. So let’s see how much we know. Take a look at the quiz that is in the bulletin. (go over the quiz)

The two scriptures for today are related to growth; each of them makes reference to sowing of seed and the growth of the kingdom of God. Like other parables we have studied,

these parables make use of comparisons. They are comparisons between spiritual and natural objects or events. Jesus used parables to show the connections between nature, human life, and His message. In an article about comparisons, the author made this observation: Jesus’ presence among men was itself “a manifestation of the Divine in the human, the invisible in the visible the supernatural in the natural.” In the Greek testament the point is made that Jesus’ message was made more understandable because the story was speaking.

Of these two parables, the one about the mustard seed is the easier of the two to get the meaning. The sowing of the seed refers to the spreading of God’s word. When we accept God’s word and live it out in our lives, the results are like the growth of the mustard seed. A mustard seed grows into a large bush and puts out many branches. This Scripture seems particularly appropriate today as we send off our mission team to the Philippines. What may start as a small church grows as people share their faith and work side by side to accomplish a great deal more together. Repairs to buildings, medical mission and visiting the home for the ageing and community worship are all “seeds” of faith in action. This is an example of the Scripture story “speaking” and becoming visible in positive results.

The other parable for today is the one about growing seed. A person sows a seed and then leaves it alone. The sower goes about his/her days and nights just seemingly leaving the growth of the seeds to the earth alone; no mention is made of tending the garden. Only at the end when the plants are mature does the person harvest the crop.

There are two puzzling things about this parable. The first is the reference to the kingdom of God; that phrase actually appears in both of the parables. References to the kingdom of God appear, but are not really defined. We read that the kingdom of God is like, but not that it is some specific time, place or composition. We might reflect that the kingdom of God is beyond our human conception and we may not understand its complexity until we experience it in heaven.

The second puzzling thing about this parable is the inactivity of the person who sows the seed. No mention is made of tending the garden once the seeds are sown. That threw me because for me and likely you, our gardens do not do well if neglected. We water, weed, fertilize and fight the slugs. However, the gardener in the parable is God. The first truth to face is that compared to God, we are not in control. We do not possess the ultimate secret to life and how it evolves. Humans have not ever completely created or understood life. We discover things, we can rearrange and we have discovered DNA. But the ultimate answers belong to God. William Barclay states it this way: "We do not create the Kingdom of God; the Kingdom is God's. It is true that we can frustrate it or hinder it; or we can make a situation in the world where it is given the opportunity to come more fully and speedily." Obviously the goal of our churches is the latter: to help God's reign to be fulfilled to the best of our abilities.

Another truth hidden in this parable is that nature's growth and kingdom growth are often imperceptible. If I stand there and look for my plant to grow, it is not likely to be visible. But over time they grow into maturity. It is a matter of trust and patience. All of us have seen the wonderful results of faith in action and these results did not occur overnight, but occur they have. The other corollary this is that God's growth is constant, God's plans unfold regularly and often quietly. In the meantime our impatience with slow progress is our problem, not God's. We need to trust that goodness will "grow" and over time our efforts, with God's help, will produce good results, a good harvest.

It is an unfortunate fact that for many churches in our country, attendance has sagged and some mainline churches have closed. You can talk to most any pastor or persons who regularly attend church and at some point the topic of church growth will come up. We pay attention to our membership numbers, our budgets and whether or not we are being successful in attracting and keeping new members. These are legitimate concerns, but I wonder if we are missing something.

The story of Trinity Presbyterian church in Tacoma is a case in point. They went from being on life support, so to speak, to a thriving community church. What happened is nothing short of miraculous. It began one evening in the mid-1980's when this one long term member was the only person to show up for the Wednesday night prayer meeting. She recalls waiting for someone else to arrive and saw all the church's empty classrooms. She said, "I just stayed and prayed by myself-that we would have people here and that others would come." Gradually people did begin to come. Notice she said gradually: could that be like the slow growth of seeds?

The church formed a task force to see what they could do for the community. Again, notice that it was not inwardly focused but outward toward the community. They developed a tutoring program for kids in the local schools and a weekly soup and conversation gathering to help build relationships with the people in the neighborhood. One of the more telling remarks that was made about their recovery pertains to our study this morning. Here is a quote from a former pastor who was there during the early stages of this church's new growth. "God had given us everything we needed to thrive, she continues. We had folks with a huge heart for the

struggles of poverty. We had talent, purpose and faith. What we needed was to open our eyes to what God's Spirit was doing and not get in the way."

So, for this church the "seeds" were talent, purpose and faith. I might add commitment. But pay special attention to the last part; the need to open our eyes to see what God was doing and not get in the way. When I read this last phrase it was like a light bulb going off. Now maybe that is the answer to the confusing part of the parable of the sower. Maybe the part that seemed like the sower was "not doing anything" was doing just the right thing. When we are trying to discern what to do, there are times when we should just get out of the way and let God show us what to do. This does not have to apply only to the topic of church growth, but to all areas of faith. The one thing that impressed me about Trinity Presbyterian was the willingness to look outward and to actively seek the input from the neighborhood. Who would know best, but the people in our community whose daily lives might be improved by a life of faith in a church family. Thoughts worth pondering!

Looking back over the process of studying these parables, it was a slow process. One question led to another and then to searching for explanations. The seeds that were planted were questions, admitting I did not understand fully and following the Spirit's promptings.

I think that in the case of the first parable, feeling like something was missing was the best thing of all. It forced me to look further before finding some plausible answers. Then being willing to see a church that was by all accounts falling apart experience growth was an eye opener. Reaching out and being willing to ask the "silent community" what they needed was a very productive "seed." It was an open-ended process. As Calvary looks back at our past and then moves ahead into the future, we may do well to follow the lessons from the Trinity church. Then getting out of the way and letting God work may be the best fertilizer of all.

Let Us Pray...