

“Grown By God” – Mark 4:26-34 – Proper 6/Ordinary 11 – June 18, 2006

I think most of you know that between the ProVisionaries Conference in Mississauga a couple of weekends ago, and the 132nd General Assembly in St. Catharines, I had the opportunity to spend some time with my oldest son and his family in P.E.I. It was a perfect time to be in PEI, as everything was lush and green and verdant, and newly planted fields were showing the promise of grain and corn to be harvested later this year. Corn is easy to spot, because of the wide spacing between rows and even plants in the row. Other grains, like wheat and oats and barley, are much harder to recognize at this stage, because they all look like grass. Only later when the heads start to sprout is it easier for a duffer like me to tell the differences. Barley is the easiest, because of the awns, the hair-like thingies that stick out of the heads.

Following the conference, and before I left for PEI, I was able to drive up past the farm that we used to have when I was in seminary at Knox College (wow - some 25 years ago now ... where has the time gone?!) It was fascinating to once again drive alongside the fields, and to look with a critical eye how well it had been cultivated and seeded. Each little dip and curve was still familiar – the place where it would still be damp, the rock that was too large to remove, the curve around the family garden. The tug of the land, especially in this seeding season, was still very strong!

Little wonder then that Jesus used parables about seeds and plants to describe the kingdom of God, since the society in which he lived was mainly agricultural. Mind you, he did have to explain those parables, and claimed that his followers still would have trouble understanding – perhaps that was because his closest followers were fishermen, not farmers – but his agricultural parables surely would have been readily understood by many if not most. However, we need to look at the messages of these parables and work back from those meanings to try to recover the context, to see if we can understand what issues Jesus was addressing with them.

We'll look at the two that we read this morning, the one about the mystery of how a seed turns into a plant, and the one about how an itty-bitty, teensy-weensy mustard seed can turn into a huge tree. There are a couple of understandings we can see in the first of these parables, the one about the seed developing and being harvested. If we focus on the part about being attacked with the sickle, then we hear the parable as a call that now is the time for the harvest, that this is the end time, the kingdom is near. No doubt there were many listening to Jesus who lived their lives in apocalyptic expectation, expecting fire and wrath and judgment just around the next corner, but who were frustrated that the coming of the kingdom seemed delayed. They would hear this parable as both an assurance that the kingdom was indeed close, but also as an explanation for the apparent delay.

The first parable seems also to assure those around Jesus who would have been frustrated at the seemingly random growth or development of the kingdom, that events were not unfolding in nice, neat straight lines, but with more and more apparent setbacks, controversy and confusion. The message in this case is that God is in control, and the development of the kingdom was as much a God-driven mystery as the growth of a seed into a plant.

That issue of frustration at the time it was taking for the kingdom to appear, and the slow, often-chaotic development of the early church, surely affected and afflicted those early Christians as well, and the gospel authors sought to address those frustrations and fears by reminding the faithful of what Jesus had said. Mark pairs his unique parable of the mystery of growth with the more common one of the mustard seed to speak a word of encouragement to a church wondering how on earth such a tiny collection of people could ever grow into anything like the promised kingdom. Hunted, persecuted, meeting furtively in homes and caves, there must have been many times they despaired that their movement would fizzle out, that in a generation or two it would have all disappeared, no more than a forgotten memory.

I was reminded at General Assembly that there are corners of the church today who feel that same way, worried and concerned that they are small, ineffective, and fighting long odds in their hope and dream of building the kingdom of God. These are the congregations who see numbers dwindling, people aging, young people leaving both the town and the church, and who despair that they are so tiny nothing could come of them. They do see mega-churches sprouting up here and there, but instead of being encouraged by these examples they are driven even deeper into a sense of being unworthy and irrelevant.

To the small band of close disciples, Jesus spoke these parables of encouragement. To the struggling and tiny early church, Mark echoed these parables of encouragement from Jesus. And the scriptures still speak these same words of encouragement in these parables to the church today. The first parable reminds us that the growth is from God, totally apart from human effort (the sower sleeps and rises) and from human understanding (“he does not know how”). The outcome of the seed is determined in part by its DNA, coupled with the nurturing environment of soil, sunshine and rain. Efforts to coerce and force growth are futile – we can till the soil, add nourishment, protect from weeds, but the growth is still God-given. The kingdom of God is not the kingdom of human effort, nor the kingdom of human striving, nor the kingdom of human accomplishment – it is the kingdom of God.

And to those who despair over their smallness, their seeming insignificance, who are concerned, frustrated or even depressed by small beginnings, the second parable offers a message to take heart. The vision of the “greatest of shrubs” inspires our efforts, realizing that with God’s intention even the tiniest of beginnings can blossom into a spectacular part of the kingdom of God.

And if you need a particular example, you need look no further than the Hummingbird Ministries. A tiny seed of a vision was planted with Mary. The soil was prepared, and the seed has been nurtured. Frustrations in funding, difficulties in communications, challenges of participation and meeting space, even setbacks in the form of car fires have provided opportunities for disappointment and even discouragement. Sometimes the tasks of healing and reconciliation seem so overwhelming that it is easy to wonder whether our modest efforts can ever bear fruit. Yet within it all the seed of this vision continues to grow with God’s grace. The efforts of Mary, and Marie, and Ruthie, and all who struggle in this ministry are both necessary and desired, but it is God’s bountiful and plentiful grace that makes not just growth but success possible.

Hear then the message of grace in these parables, the promise that with God’s nurturing strength the tiniest of visions can indeed turn into the most powerful of ministries offered in Christ’s name. Do not be discouraged, but recall that in Christ all things are possible.