

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

Well, I arrived safely back from General Assembly very late Friday night, and I am really glad to be home! It was an interesting week, not a lot that was extremely controversial, and we made a little progress on moving the church forward. I had a chance to recuperate a bit yesterday, and after walking with Elizabeth to her work in Edgemont Village I delighted in sitting with a Starbucks in the cool shade of a tree looking at Grouse Mountain and marveling about this wonderful creation of God in which we live. The memories of seeing much of the country from the air on a clear day are also still vivid ... for example I was able to easily make out from almost two hundred miles away the bridge across the Straits of Mackinac joining the upper and lower parts of Michigan, and to remember with fondness crossing that piece of water in the old steamboat before the bridge was built. There were seemingly endless cultivated farm fields, wide expanses of forest, and square miles of grazing land laid out patterns that were sometimes precisely aligned and other times either random or determined by geographic features such as lakes, rivers, and bedrock.

Given our history of agriculture that long precedes our history of history, and how we are still dependant on the land, it is little wonder that Jesus used parables about seeds and plants to describe the kingdom of God. Mind you, he did still have to explain those parables, and claimed that his followers still would have trouble understanding. This was perhaps because his closest followers were fishermen, not farmers – but even for farmers his agricultural parables often were confusing, and the messages buried deep enough that the meanings are often difficult to dig out. 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 tree. We can notice a couple of understandings in the first of these parables, the one about the seed quietly 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. It's a bit difficult to have a great deal of positive anticipation about being mowed down by the sickle of God, but this group would hear this parable as both an assurance that the kingdom was indeed close and 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 still 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.

Not that this second parable is free from confusing images just like the first. For example, the mustard shrub is an insidious weed in a canola field. And using the word ‘tree’ to describe this particular piece of flora doesn’t quite fit the images raised by the word ‘tree’ to someone who lives on the Wet – er, West Coast. The tree named in the parable is not your lofty, towering, magnificent Douglas Fir reaching toward heaven. It’s more like a scraggly bush, kind of like a mutant rhododendron bush, but nowhere near so pretty. Next to the mustard shrub even a black spruce on the tundra looks good!

But when you stop for a moment to reflect, isn’t the mustard shrub a wonderful metaphor for the kingdom, or at least for the church? Roots firmly anchored, defying anyone to wrest the tree from the ground or from history. You can’t pull this thing out with a tractor and chain! One short, thick, and gnarled trunk soon divides into a number of twisted – almost chaotic – branches, first heading this way, then that way, then suddenly reversing course and dividing again. There’s a randomness and yet a purposefulness about it that is truly reflected in the church as it has developed over two millennia. All of it not necessarily pretty, but providing protection and cool restorative shade for those who rely upon it, and providing spice for the world at large.

The symbol that was used at this year’s General Assembly was a more traditional if somewhat stylized tree – roots, level ground, single trunk, nice orderly branches and pretty leaves, and the accompanying motto “Rooted and Built Up In Christ.” It’s a lovely logo, and presents an iconic view of the church that is neat, and clean, and uplifting. But somehow I’m attracted more to the mustard shrub in the parable, for it looks more like real life, and real church, to me. I guess there are congregations out there that for a while at least experience life and faith in linear ways, but my experiences have shown a different, more interesting, path that does indeed reflect the twists and turns of a mustard shrub.

Hear then the messages of grace in these parables. Hear that the church is not so unlike the picture of the kingdom offered by the mustard shrub, not necessarily linear or pretty, but nevertheless strongly rooted in God and offering solace in the cool shade for those who need to take refuge. Hear that the growth is due to God’s nurturing love, and that we can anticipate being gathered into his powerful arms. And hear 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. Hear the grace of God proclaimed by Christ, our Lord.