

Date: Sunday June 14, 2009

Scripture: Mark 4:26-34

Title: “God is in the Growth”

The Message of Scripture (Sermon Thesis): As humans, we have a role to play in the world as we are in relationship with God as illustrated by “someone” the sower. Still, we are not the ones in complete control.

The Sharing of the Good News (The Sermon Purpose): It is God who is in the growth, not dependent upon human success or failure. That’s a great thing!

(Remember, it’s all about God!)

Whenever Katie, a little six year old girl was asked her name, she would most often reply, “I’m Katie, Pastor Allen’s daughter.” Thinking that the little girl needed to assert her own identity, Katie’s mom said, “Honey, when someone asks your name, don’t say Pastor Allen’s daughter, just say Katie.” A few days later a man asked the little girl her name. Katie replied, “I’m Katie.” The man then said, “Oh you are Pastor Allen’s daughter.” To which Katie replied, “My dad says so, but my mom’s not so sure” (Dyck).

I share that story this morning with its element of mistaken identity because we might find mistaken identity with today’s Gospel passage from Mark. It has been interesting to work with this week’s Gospel passage and to read various interpretations of Mark’s work concerning this story, which is actually two parables – the seed growing secretly and the mustard seed – and to try and sort out just who’s who in this passage. What I mean is that some commentators translate the “someone” mentioned in this passage as God. The idea being that it is God who

not only grows the seed that becomes the kingdom, but plants and harvests it as well. Others ask us to consider that it is the Christian planting the seed when actions of witnessing and evangelizing are undertaken. One suggestion was that the “someone” in today’s passage could be Jesus following the thought that Jesus certainly “scattered” a great many words as if they were seeds and the results could be described in a similar fashion to the result in today’s passage. Perhaps the point of today’s story is about the seed itself and its surprising, uncontrollable growth. Those are just four of the suggested interpretations for today’s passage. So there is, at the very least, some question of identity in today’s passage.

Now, I take a higher view of theological anthropology. That is, as humans, we have a distinct role to play as we go about our relationship with God and it is vital that we keep our human experience in mind as we reflect upon our relationship with God. This has to be; otherwise the idea of God’s love for us and creation of us is meaningless. God has purpose for our creation and that is, first and foremost, to be in relationship with us and relationship means activity. Therefore, I find that it adds an important dimension to the passage when we consider ourselves the “someone” in Mark’s story. We can find examples throughout the Gospel of Jesus calling us to be active participants in God’s Kingdom and not be passive bystanders. So my suggestion is that we see ourselves as the one scattering the seed and doing the harvesting. As a boy from the farm, this all makes perfect sense. There is an old saying that I find quite appropriate for this passage about planting, growing, and harvesting and for considering our work in the world in relationship to God; the

saying goes, “It is OK to pray for a good crop, but go ahead and cultivate.”

Having said all this, there is that note that I keep at the top of my sermon manuscript that reads, “Remember, it is about God!” We may do the planting and harvesting, but it is God who does the growing. Now on the surface, that sounds acceptable – even pleasing. But within those words is the realization that we must give up control. That’s not so easy to do. How often do we want to see the Kingdom of God revealed in the world right now? We might even demand it, but that still doesn’t make it happen. How often do we want the world to be ordered according to God’s will, where the poor and outcast are welcomed, where wars are only a thought from the past, and where God’s peace reigns supreme? We cannot seem to make it happen. In fact, some days it seems we may never get there. How often do we yell at the seed, “Grow already!”? But to no avail. It will only happen in God’s time. The well known preacher Fred Craddock has said, “It will come up in its own good time; with the sun and water it will come up. You don’t have to beg it, you do not have to blackmail it, and you do not have to threaten it. Just plant it. It is God’s seed, and the seed carries its future in its bosom. Trust the seed” (Chellew-Hodge).

Now, of course, trusting the seed means that we must have faith. Oh yeah, faith. We must believe without doubt that the seed will grow, even and especially, when we see no evidence of growth or we feel trapped in a prolonged drought. We have to remember that nothing emerges fully grown. There will always be a beginning, middle, and an end. In this case there is planting, growing, and

harvesting as we work in partnership with God. But through it all, the growing is about God. We plant the seeds, tend the garden, cultivate, and take care of the harvest when the seed has ripened. No effort, no matter how small, is ever wasted as we work along with God. That's the work of faith. Jesus might even say that if our faith is as small as a mustard seed, we are still sharing in valuable work in the kingdom making field.

It is, however, curious that Jesus would use the image of the mustard seed for the kingdom of God. We spent a lengthy discussion about this at our pastor's Bible study recently. We wondered why compare the kingdom to a mustard plant? This particular plant in Jesus' day would have been considered a shrub and certainly not a tree. It was prohibited by Jewish law from growing in gardens (Wikipedia). That could make it a weed! So thinking of a mustard plant doesn't evoke images of overwhelming power and grandeur. Why not compare the Kingdom of God to a gigantic oak tree or how about the idea of the kingdom being a majestic cedar?

Well, it may have been that the mustard seed and the resulting plant is a more appropriate choice. That mustard plant might have been scorned as a weed just as the kingdom of God was, and is, scorned by many of the world. An oak or cedar would be admired for their beauty; they would be cherished by the high and mighty image makers of the world. The mustard seed plant is a nuisance. Who would want to be associated with a nuisance? But like a weed, and I am recalling all those weeds from my bean walking days, just like a persistent weed, the Kingdom of God hangs in there with the best of them. We can seek to subvert the kingdom of God

by glorifying the material things of this world; the things that we think give the right and mighty impression. We can try and ignore the kingdom, just like many have ignored the weeds of their field. We can attempt to control the kingdom, its power, and it's here now but not yet presence, just like we try and control weeds, but no matter what we do, the growth of the kingdom continues. The growth continues because it's about God.

Think about a weed. Think about dandelions in the yard. The weeds will appear in all sorts of places. We sure don't pick those places. I mean the weeds make it in places we don't want them to and where we try and keep them from appearing. There had been a brown spot in the yard behind the parsonage. It was difficult to determine why it was there and it looked like no grass or anything else was going to grow. Yet, in the places where the decorative white rock had been spread, here came little weeds pushing themselves up through the ground. Why won't the weeds grow in the places where it would have been nice to have some green and stay out of the places where they are not wanted? It doesn't matter why. The weeds grow where they are supposed to grow. So it is with the kingdom of God.

So this is where we put our faith – even our mustard seed sized faith – we put it in that which grows wild in the world. We put our faith in a weed of the world that makes its presence known in times and places we don't choose and places we might otherwise ignore (Chellew-Hodge). I mean really, when is the last time we gave any thought to a mustard seed plant?

Thankfully, the figure of the “someone” sowing the seed is a reminder that the consummation of God’s reign is not dependent on our efforts. We are freed from the burden of determining the time of harvest and of assuming that our successes or failures hasten or deter God’s plans. What a liberating thought! The fortunes of the kingdom of God do not rise or fall based on our metrics of failure or success. The good news today is that while we are the “someone” sowing the seed, God is in the growth and there’s no mistaken identity about that for where in the world isn’t God?

A friend sent a poem this week that highlights today’s good news.

He was just a little boy,
On a week’s first day.
Wandering home from Bible school,
And dawdling on the way.

He scuffed his shoes into the grass;
He even found a caterpillar.
He found a fluffy milkweed pod,
And blew out all the ‘filler.’

A bird’s nest in a tree overhead,
So wisely placed up so high.
Was just another wonder,
That caught his eager eye.

A neighbor watched his zig-zag course,
And hailed him from the lawn;
Asked him where he’d been that day
And what was going on.

“I’ve been to Bible School,”
He said and turned a piece of sod.
He picked up a wiggly worm replying,
“I’ve learned a lot about God.”

“M’m very fine way,” the neighbor said,
“for a boy to spend his time.

“If you’ll tell me where God is,
I’ll give you a brand new dime.”

Quick as a flash the answer came!
Nor were his accents faint.
“I’ll give you a dollar, Mister,
If you can tell me where God ain’t.”
Author Unknown (email from Rev. Dee Pennington)

Yes, thanks be to God for God’s eternal, mysterious, all encompassing, persistent,
and yes, weed-like presence. Let us pray.

Lord,

We certainly give you thanks for your presence in all times and all places. We are grateful that you are present with us here and that we can call upon your name. In the midst of challenges when we wonder what will be, remind us that you always know and can see the possibilities and outcomes that may be hidden from us. In that truth, we take great comfort. And in your name we pray. Amen.

Offering: Let us share our morning offering as we celebrate God’s presence in our midst. The ushers will please . . .

Dedication: Lord, accept and bless this offering and our service to you as we seek to share the good news of your presence in the world.

Benediction: Friends, go forth in the care and growing of God, in the peace and joy of Christ, and in the power and love of the Holy Spirit. Amen and Amen.

Sources:
Chellew-Hodge, Candace; [The Minister’s Annual Manual](#); Logos Productions: Inver Grove Heights, MN; 2008.

Dyck, Drew; [Let My People Laugh](#); Thomas Nelson: Nashville, TN; 2009.

[Holy Bible – New Revised Standard Version](#); Harper Bibles: San Francisco; 2007.

Pennington, Dee; Email; June 2009

Wikipedia; “The Mustard Seed”; June 2009.