

The Growth of the Kingdom

Mark 4:26-32 *He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?"*

Lately I have been sliding back into some bad spiritual habits. Worry. Anxiousness. Fear. It has to do with the Festival Center mission. Amazing things have happened throughout our six years on the corner of Fifth and Madison Streets. The after school program continues and is now partnered with LCF's Hope II program at Lynchburg High Apartments and the Legacy Museum. A summer program for the children begins this week. The garden is now a jewel sparkling in the neighborhood through the loving work of Curtis Harper and the children he leads in planting and cultivating. The center has become a catalyst for bringing together organizations and groups that serve in the College Hill neighborhood, and people who live there. Two neighborhood forums have been held at the center since February and another is scheduled for August. As many as thirty-five representatives of organizations and the neighborhood have gathered to talk about common concerns and needs, and to find ways to address them.

Out of these meetings the project of a neighborhood FM radio station has emerged through the vision, experience, and commitment of Quentin Lawson, energetic minister of Trinity and Jackson Street UMCs, who will be coming onto our board in July. The station will broadcast helpful, informative, and uplifting programming for the people who live in College Hill. We are exploring the possibility that the station will be part of the Festival Center's program and have its studio upstairs in the building. Quentin called me Friday afternoon very excited because he was going to start broadcasting at 6 pm from his home on Jackson St.

With such a harvest before my eyes, why in the world was I waking up at 3 am, my mind sinking into a pit of worry? I was becoming obsessed with the thought that our current funds will keep us going for about six to eight more months. A dear friend of the Church of the Covenant has provided major funding from the beginning, and she doesn't even live in Virginia! Local funding has been in some ways generous but not sufficient thus far to sustain our relatively small budget. So, I fall into these bouts of fear and worry.

With my spirit in this sorry and faithless condition, on Monday morning I opened to the gospel reading for today--Jesus' two little parables about seeds and growing...and what Jesus calls the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is the reality of God's presence and reign in our lives and the life of the world. It is the way God made life to be. It is the way God works in the depths of life beyond our seeing. Jesus' life and teachings centered on the dawning of God's reign. He called people to wake up in order to see it, receive it, and be part of it. The kingdom of God is not something after we die. It is not in the future or in some other place we think will be perfect. It is now. It is near, even within us (Lk. 17:21). It is about our living in harmony with reality as it really is!

A parable is more of an Eastern than a Western way of teaching. It is a simple story or teaching meant to free our minds from our conventional ways of thinking and looking. Parables can awaken our inner vision to see things in a new and different way. They are not puzzles to be figured out. They are for us to contemplate so that we get a deeper, clearer insight into reality.

First, the parable of the seed sown by someone who then goes to bed, gets up, and goes to bed, going on with daily life. The seed sprouts and grows. The sower hasn't a clue how it happens and does nothing to make it happen. The earth produces "of itself," says Jesus. This echoes the first story of creation in Genesis 1. The earth is created with the power in itself to "bring forth" life in trees and plants and all growing things. Curtis shared with us at the School for Christian Living scripture study Wednesday night that he had been with the children out in the garden at the Festival Center. They were picking the beans that they had planted weeks ago. "Did you ever think," said Curtis, holding up a bean from a pod, "that this big vine would come from this little seed?" Maybe we can give scientific explanations, but ultimately we fall into complete wonder and awe. We don't really know HOW or WHY it happens. No wonder Jesus used agricultural images to talk about God's realm!

The harvest comes, and now it is time for the sower to do something--reap the harvest. Seed planting, watching, harvesting—that's all the sower does. When it comes to the kingdom of God, life as God created it and is bringing it about, ours is to plant seeds and watch for the harvest. The growth is up to God and it is a complete mystery to us. But the growth is sure and certain. It doesn't depend on us. All we do is plant seeds and get out of the way. And we have to pay attention because it may not happen in the ways we expect.

This good news may be painful for us activist sorts who are aware of the great problems of the world that need solving! Sometimes we speak of our "building the kingdom of God." The parable says the opposite, I'm afraid. The growth of God's kingdom involves our planting seeds. We need to cultivate attentiveness and watchfulness, and a sense of wonder at the mystery of it. We need to be ready to see and to reap the harvest when it happens. But the growth is God's doing, not ours.

We experience God's call to a particular mission, something we feel inwardly compelled to do for the world. This is God planting a seed in us. We nurture that vision in ourselves through prayer and inner listening. We come together with others to form a mission group around the vision and mission. We discern what beginning steps we are to take, the seeds we need to plant. We take complete responsibility for what God has called us to do and commit ourselves to a group inward journey so that together we can be attentive to the growth. We work with our own lives and together to make room, as it were, for God to work, to be aware when our egos are getting in the way or when we start to lock into our own view of things, blocking our openness to others and to God. Together we cultivate the spiritual vision to see what God is doing all along the way and to follow that growth when it happens and where it is going.

These parables were reminding me that our work is always the planting of seeds and leaving the growth to God. We do everything we can while at the same time getting out of the way so God can bring the growth. We don't force it. We don't cause it. We don't run over people as we try to build the kingdom the way we want it. We continue the spiritual work of keeping our hearts, minds, and lives open, creating a space where the seed can grow to a harvest and seeing what other seeds we might sow. It is about working in harmony with the Power of life itself, doing our part while knowing we are not in charge of outcomes.

The parable of the mustard seed is so familiar that we might miss its potency. The tiniest of seeds grows into a huge shrub that shelters the birds. Small beginnings and unexpected endings. The little things have within them the potential for growth and life beyond our expectations. Each action, word, thought, decision we make can be a seed of suffering or healing, disharmony or harmony. This is a very hopeful and positive word! Each seed we sow, no matter how small, if it is sown in and out of love, compassion, generosity, and the desire for a just and peaceful world...each seed has within it the potential for effects beyond anything we can imagine. But again, the growth is not ours, but God's

One of the many things I cherish about our community is our understanding that it is the little things that are most important. The one specific and focused mission. The one person whose need we try to respond to. The one gift that a person brings that is full of life and blessing, adding a new dimension to our life and ministry. Small groups learning how to love each other and to be faithful to something God has called them to do. This is the wisdom that our faithfulness to the small thing enables the bigger thing to happen, and that there really is no small thing.

We are always tempted to lose faith in the power of the small things and seed-planting. We want to see big changes quickly. We want to build the kingdom ourselves, right now. But the deal with that is, we end up frustrated, or angry, always agitated, and making everybody around us as agitated as we are! The most impressive and life-giving work I've seen comes from people who are attentive to the small things, who assume responsibility over what they feel called to do and stick with it over the long haul. It takes patience, humility, and a deepening devotion. It also brings the joy that comes from having the time of our lives doing what we feel called to do, knowing that our small effort is part of a much greater Effort that is at the core of life itself. We learn how to stop looking for results and relish the process of giving to the world what God has given us uniquely to give. We grow in a deepening commitment to and understanding of community, mission, and our own spiritual growth. That is the way we can see and become part of the kingdom of God as it grows from seed to harvest.

Jesus never said a word about our building the kingdom of God. The harvest, the results, the big picture are all a part of the deep mystery of how God works to bring forth life as it is meant to be. Our work is to "repent" in the true meaning of that word--to get new minds, a new way of living so that we can get with what God is already doing. That's what the inward journey is about, making room in our awareness and our inner life for a sensitivity to God's presence and movements in our lives and the life of the world. It is a kind of spiritual balance--doing what we are called to do with responsibility, care, and faithfulness, and, at the same time, knowing that the growth of the kingdom is God's doing, not ours.

So, Monday morning after another restless night, I began to reflect on these parables and the condition of my spirit. The clear message for me was: What seeds can I begin to sow that may grow into a better situation for the Festival Center? I stopped looking at the big, scary picture of the months down the road. I began to do the little things that I could do, and to become aware of the seeds others are sowing on behalf of our mission. What harvests we have had for six years on the corner of Fifth and Madison Streets! What harvests are emerging now! They all came from seed planting, doing what we could, with responsibility and care, trusting that the growth was not ours but God's to bring about. I don't know what is going to happen. Maybe the Festival Center will thrive and flourish. Maybe it will not. Ultimately that is up to God. But I do know that when we are attentive to the seed planting, doing the things we are given to do, we are part of what God is doing--bringing about the growth of the kingdom, life the way God made it to be. And I think this is a word for all of us in whatever challenging and perhaps overwhelming situations we find ourselves. It can be a way of freeing us from our anxiousness, worry, and fear, so that we can do the little things that are part of the big thing God is doing for us and the world.