"Recognizing Growth"

Sermon by Dan Harrison, pastor, Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, VA 6/13/21

Mark 4:26-29

> *"Jesus said, 'This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head.'"*

Growing is an inevitable part of who we are. Like we discussed last week, change is naturally part of our biology. And like the scripture we just read, Jesus teaches us that no matter what you do—growth will happen naturally. Over night seeds will sprout new life –without your help. God is growing you and everything around you, even if you don't see it. But it takes eyes that are looking for it, to recognize it. Sometimes we struggle to separate the trees from the forest when we stare at it too long. But by seeing the tree in the forest, we begin to appreciate the little things. The things we take for granted.

For example, you came here this morning without fear that you would be apprehended by federal authorities. You have citizenship or have secured residency. But there are people in our city who fear every day that authorities will take them and put them in jail because they don't have the proper paperwork to stay in this country, and then if they are returned to their home country they may be killed. It's the little things we don't think about that we often take for granted.

When we lived in Kuwait we became very close friends with a man named Joshua. Joshua was from Sudan. We became so close that our kids called him uncle, and he had a permanent room at our home there. Joshua had grown up in the middle of a civil war and was forced to leave. He escaped to Jordan with other members of his family, but he had no "legal" permission to be there. After living there for years without a visa or even a passport, authorities apprehended Joshua. They knew returning him to his home country could mean a death sentence, so they listened to Joshua's begging for an alternative solution. They agreed to take Joshua to their border with Iraq whose government had been dissolved since it was in a state of internal war at the time. So, they watched Joshua walk across the border into a war zone. Can you imagine being faced with a decision like that? But Joshua had no choice.

God was with him, though. He found people that took him to Baghdad where he would work for a nonprofit NGO doing relief work throughout the country. Eventually, his group had to evacuate when they come under attack, narrowly escaping with a military convoy into the small country of Kuwait where we lived. It was here that we met Joshua, and the members of his team. And once again Joshua found himself without a visa to stay in the country. I became Joshua's advocate, accompanying him to petition the Sudanese government for his passport and also with the Kuwait government to request permission to stay. After many months of back and forth, temporary permission was given, but then like with Jordan, Kuwait required that Joshua return to Iraq, and so Joshua did. He headed up a project to bring water to group of Southern Iraqis. A few months later I got the call that Joshua had been kidnapped. This was not uncommon but it shocked us, not knowing what the outcome will be.

However let me remind us, God is working all around us. God is sowing the seeds and growing the trees. And even here while with his captors, Joshua shared nothing but stories of love and hope, telling them his story. They were moved by his journey, and the story of his survival from war zone to war zone; eventually Joshua made friends with his captors and just like with the Jordanian authorities or the Kuwaiti authorities, here these bandits also felt compassion for him. They released him.

My question for you today is a simple one: Do you recognize all that God has done and is doing in your life? Do you see the growth points? If not, take a moment and look. The signposts are there. God is moving all around, but we must stop and recognize it and then move with it.

Shalom