

Unpredictable growth

June 14, 2009

Ezekiel 17:22-24

Mark 4:26-34

The more I thought about these parables this week the more I realized they were miracle stories. You might ask how is the story of planting a seed and a plant growing from that a miracle. I would ask you how is it not?

Jesus tells us in Mark "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground and would sleep and rise night and day," and then without any help from the scatterer the seeds grow up so large that birds can rest in the branches. Even the smallest seed grows into an abundance of harvest.

The text goes on to say and the seed would sprout and grow, even though the harvester does not know how. This parable is about the power within the seed, which is the Word of God, within Jesus, within the Bible, the living Word. The Word is alive; it grows. Anything that grows is alive.

What is growing is God's kingdom. Let's not get confused because the parable does not say we are the seed it says the Kingdom of God is the seed. God's reign or realm is the seed that provides enormous growth of love, justice and goodness. It is God within our world and within us that is the source of all we can become. And to that there is no spiritual limit. God's presence in our lives is like a seed that if we allow it to be planted in our soil it will flourish.

That takes us back to the parable of the abundant sower found earlier in Mark 4. I like to call it that because it's the parable where the sower recklessly sows seed absolutely everywhere. He is not selective about making sure the soil is just perfect before the seeds of love and joy are sown. The seeds were scattered on rocky ground, and among thorns, and on good soil where it grew in massive amounts. Jesus goes on to tell his disciples to live as if they believe God's realm is everywhere. To live in the light, proclaim the light, and the fruit that it will bear will be immeasurable.

We don't understand it, we can't explain how God's presence can be active in even the darkest of moments and places but that is because it's not just about us. God produces miraculous things in the most unmiraculous places. God will plant the seed and the word will be spread and will grow whether we participate or not.

Today's parable tells us the earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. Now, I know the earth produces of itself in miraculous ways because I just experienced this very thing last night when I noticed some green little shoots in the dirt on my patio.

You see, last week I decided to plant some seeds in some pots. I thought it was probably too late but I wanted to try anyway. I used to garden a bit but mostly with flowers that

are already mostly grown rarely do I plant from seeds into pots. So last night when I went out on my deck I turned to Graham as if it was the biggest question in the world and asked – are those shoots of green? Is that a plant growing? He looked at me as if I was a bit crazy, laughed and said – yes I would think so. Friends, if that isn't a miracle I don't know what is. That seed growing has absolutely nothing to do with the sower of the seeds.

I like the story Edward Marquart writes of Martin Luther's response to this text. Luther said "After I preach my sermon on Sunday, when I return home, I drink my little glass of Wittenberg beer and I just let the gospel run its course." Luther said that after he pounded on the pulpit and expounded the gospel, he would go home and pull out the Sunday newspaper, and pull out his glass of warm Wittenberg beer and start to drink it and enjoy the afternoon. (Yuk warm beer)

Luther knew that the power of his sermon was not based on the power of his theological acuity. He knew that the power of his sermon was not based on his eloquence or his abilities. He knew that the power of the sermon would have no affect whatsoever unless the very Word of God got into a person's heart. Luther knew that he couldn't do that. It was the Holy Spirit who did that. Luther keenly understood the power of the Word.

The kindom of God is full of miraculous growth. The way of God is happening, and for those who are attentive there are clear signs of its reality. Yes, God uses us in God's work but whenever I think I have changed the world or someone's life I hear the voice of my mentor and friend Robin saying. I am blessed to have God choose to use me from time to time because quite frankly God could use a stick of Rhubarb if God wanted to. Parker Palmer says if we think we are the hands and feet of God in such a way that God cannot produce without us we are actually "Functional Atheists." We think we are God or at least as important as God. I don't know about you but I certainly don't want that job.

We do not control the work of God, although we are caught up in it and it has meaning for our lives. Although God may use us and have us participate in God's mission. We will find ourselves exhausted and hopeless if we feel the salvation of the world is up to us. It's a bit of a paradox really.

Something that is impossible for us to grasp. I might honestly say and believe that "the conclusion of the parable tells us that the mysterious kindom of God calls us toward God's goals and places an urgent demand on us for action in relation to what God is accomplishing and calling us to do." And yet I would also agree with the Rev. Peter Short when he says "My deepest gratitude is because the center is NOT dependent on us! That is also our hope! That the center, wherever it is, is still free/undomesticated/wild alive and growing."

“The earth produces of itself. The seed produces of itself.” The words, “Of itself,” in the Greek the word is “automatos” from which we get our English word “automatically.” Automatically God will be present and active. Automatically God will scatter about justice, love, peace and grace. And when that word gets in through the spirit it automatically, mysteriously, unpredictably grows within. This parable is all about explosive, enormous growth. God’s truth will grow and will continue to grow night and day, year in and year out no matter what. God’s kingdom will grow.

We might not recognize it. We may not see it in us but it is active, alive and present and we have an opportunity to participate in this miracle of new life and faith. We may not see it because we are looking for it in just a particular soil. We may not see it because we think the kingdom of God is held in the confines of our definition of God or religion or church. “Religion doesn’t create the Spirit – it already exists.”¹

As Crossan says - "The point... is not just that the mustard plant starts as a proverbially small seed and grows into a shrub of three or four feet... it is that it tends to take over where it is not wanted, that it tends to get out of control, and that it tends to attract birds within cultivated areas where they are not particularly desired. And that, said Jesus, was what the Kingdom was like"

There is something inside that seed which is the word that changes us. It is God, the spirit and Jesus inside the Word that gets through to us. Jesus grows in us, just as seeds grow mysteriously and miraculously.

You may have already discovered I am a believer in abundance. It’s not that I’m naïve and I think life will always be perfect, that I and everyone I know will always be rich and healthy and good-looking (although that would be nice). It’s not that I believe that within a couple weeks we will automatically grow into a huge church. (Although that also would be nice). It’s not that I am unaware of illness, or places in this world that are surrounded by despair. But what it does mean is that I believe that our God is in those places as a God of abundance. It means I believe that what God is doing is not according to our human standards, and expectations... God’s work happens in God’s design. And I believe God’s design is always about life and growth, never about oppression and despair – those things are human constructs.

Do you think that’s true? What about here in this church community? Or in the community of Squamish? Is God present? Is God abundant?

In the last week I have heard small, very small rumblings of concerns that may make us wonder where God is at work within us. I have heard some struggles we are facing around finances, and I have begun to feel the stress some others are feeling around the

¹ Author unknown

building project. In the last week I have heard concerns about too much change whether it is in worship, the building or in losing a beautiful oak tree.

And yet in the last week I have experienced joy and seen God's abundant reign as I have watched the bustle of painters, as I have listened to the stories of friends caring for one another, as I have heard the passion for the children of this congregation and the community, and as I have listened to the choir sing. In the last week I have seen the dedication of volunteers and staff all over the place. In the last week I have felt God is alive and active in this place.

Abundance may not come in the way we expect it. We may need to participate in providing more abundance ourselves through finances, volunteer time, or pastoral care. But I can tell you without a doubt that seeds have been scattered in this place and they are growing and will continue to grow.

So when you feel the spirit calling you, when you feel the seeds of love and grace and hope trying to burst open and grow within you, allow them to grow and then move them from the inside out to the open place of light and life so that you and those around you may flourish.

The Rev. Dr. Hugh Eichelberger tells of how Mother Theresa of Calcutta began her orphanage with a vision like that of the mustard seed. Mother Theresa "told her superiors, "I have three pennies and a dream From God to build an orphanage." "Mother Teresa," her superiors chided gently, "you cannot build an orphanage with three pennies...with three pennies you can't do anything." "I know," she said, smiling, "but with God and three pennies I can do anything." And she did.

God's word grows automatically. It is not passive and it doesn't grow just a little it bears much fruit. This parable is a parable of hope. It reminds us that no matter where we are, even if we are in Exile like the Israelites in Ezekiel Gods justice, love and truth will grow. The presence of God is evident in us whenever we live out justice, goodness and peace. Can you see God active in your life?
Can you see God active in this church?

As we begin to journey together in faith and community let's remember our seed is the reign of God. We have been birthed from the presence of love, justice, and grace for the world. The fact that God would use us to participate in that explosive growth is a miracle.

But then again isn't everything that lives and grows a miracle?

One of my favorite Einstein quotes is "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle."

God's growth in our lives is unpredictable. The Holy scatters God's reign even in the most unexpected times and places of our lives.

"Even the tiniest seed of faith in the mystery will suffice. God will make great and mighty things of it."

Michaela Bruzzese

Let's look forward to seeing God growing in us. Let us open our eyes and hearts to see the unpredictable holy presence in our lives, church and world. Let's embrace the miracle, now and always.

May we so live. Amen.