

Set the stage with Mark 4:1-20

### Read Mark 4:26-34

I have a quote in my office that reminds me daily when I come in. It reads, "Don't try to rush things that need time to grow." Growth is not like a light switch. It is not like we live one day and then the next we are all grown up. It takes a process of years and experiences and education and training for a child to become a youth and then a youth a young adult and then a young adult an adult and then an adult a mature adult. And even after a lifetime some of us still do not grow up 😊 or maybe it is just that we do not want to grow up 😊. Whether we are talking about a career, a trade, a skill, our bodies, our knowledge, or our spirituality and life of discipleship, growth does not just happen. Growth is something God made a part of creation and one frame of reference for growth is that it happens with time. Growth also happens when many variables are at work together- time, influence, environment, elements, challenge, success, inspiration, celebration, etc.

Summer is a season identified liturgically in the church as the season of ordinary time but many theologians and church leaders through the years have grown to refer to it as a season of growth. There is little to wonder why the color for this season is green.

As I think about growth, the Greek word being *auxano*, meaning to grow, increase, become greater, it is hard not to think about plants like trees and bushes. Plants are one of the most obvious and interpretive applications for growth, especially in agricultural communities like in Jesus' time on earth. But it is also hard not to think about increasing in number and growing spiritually by allowing God to become greater in us as we become less.

Both my biblical and personal reflections on the liturgical season of growth this year collided in a very familiar place. They collided with stories. But not just any stories. Familiar stories about the kingdom of God. Stories that have been passed on from century to century and paid forward from generation to generation, because they are stories worth retelling. Why do we retell the stories? Because they have made a difference in our life; they have helped us grow. And when something makes a difference in our life it is natural for us to want to share with others we love and know could benefit from the same.

I had an image come to mind of sitting around the dinner table. This was a regular tradition for my family growing up and we always ate family style, meaning you had to learn to hold a bowl or plate, get what you needed for your plate, and pass it on to the next person. It was great lesson in giving and receiving. I can smell it now, sitting at our

dinner table growing up as a hungry teenager, “Will you please pass the potatoes? Oh, and more meatloaf?” There was usually bread of some kind so you would often here, “Please pass the basket of rolls!”

Why is this pertinent? Retelling stories, passing them on, and paying them forward is like passing potatoes and rolls around the dinner table. Passing food encourages physical growth like passing stories encourages spiritual growth. It just happens that the dinner table is also a great place for stories to be shared.

Consider what Marla Rae Anders writes, “Pay it forward- it’s about caring and sharing; it’s about compassion and kindness; it’s about generosity; it’s about sacrifice... and love. You get what you give so give good.” Food. Service. Kindness. Forgiveness. Love. Stories.

Do you know what story I remember most from my childhood and every other time in life leading up to today? The story of “Jesus Love Me.” I heard “Jesus Love You” from my parents, grandparents, Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, and yes, even coaches and teachers through the years. The story about “The Little Engine that Could” is another one that has stuck with me. Come to think of it, these stories together explain quite a bit about me 😊

What about you? What stories do you hold dear? What story are you sure to share with others? Is it a bible story? Is it sound advice from a philosopher? Is it a point you cannot get out of your head? Something for us to ponder is that story, or advice, or point, was once shared with us for the first time. Over time and influence and environment and elements and challenge and success and inspiration and celebration, that story grew and grew, increased, and became greater. “Small beginnings can yield great outcomes.”

One of our Christian responsibilities, along with worshipping God, giving back to God, building relationships with others, and serving others, is to share stories as a witness to God. As God’s children, we are called to share the stories that make an eternal impact and life-giving difference. A difference to us yes, but a difference to others and the world as well.

The stories we encounter in the Bible, like the ones we read a moment ago from Mark 4 and others we will encounter throughout this Summer, are often in the form of a parable. Parables are more than metaphors or allegories or analogies or riddles that sound intriguing. As the ultimate storyteller, Jesus used parables to affirm and connect our individual and historical story with the larger story of God’s movement in our lives and in the life of the world. It can be said that Jesus uses parables to say to those whom he was talking to at the time (and we consider it us today as recipients of these stories paid forward from generation to generation), “You count because God is in your life. Your life and your witness have energy and value because God has filled you with gifts.” If we apply this belief to every parable we encounter

from Jesus, our understanding of God will increase, we will grow spiritually, and we will become greater for it.

I came across a commentator this week, Nibs Stroupe, that discusses the nature of parables as Jesus' way of sharing secrets to the kingdom of God. The notion is that these parables will only be understood by those who believe and are seeking the kingdom of God. To take this further, this means there are those who will know and those who will not know. Jesus knew there were people working against him and God. Christianity could not be worn on your shirt and your neck like it can today or you would have been dealt with accordingly. Following Jesus and seeking the kingdom of God was a threat. Guess what? Following Jesus and seeking the kingdom of God is still a threat today! It is the right thing to do. It is the best thing to do. It is the most valuable thing to do. And because we live in a world that often wants what it is cheap, and wrong, and easy, following Jesus and seeking the kingdom of God remains a threat.

More than identifying those who might understand though, Jesus tells these stories to begin with because he is looking for hungry hearts (those who ask for more), those longing for the bread of life (or meat and potatoes), and those whom the world's answers are not adequate. In Matthew 5, Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." Here is the thing. We can hunger and thirst for a lot of things, so we must distinguish between that which will fill us with righteousness and that which could drain us.

The stories we must focus on and retell are stories pertaining to the kingdom of God. These stories work to continually break open our understanding of the reign of God. They are elusive yet pointed, indirect yet powerfully relevant- like the very kingdom Jesus brings with him from heaven to earth. Don Saliers writes, "What is God's kingdom like? To what shall we compare it? No answer will ever exhaust the meaning of this question, but the pulse of Jesus' words, deeds, death, and resurrection point to the secret hid from a distracted, hopeless world."

Let us now engage the parables Jesus shares with us in Mark 4. To start, I am curious of at least one thing: "How many of us are tired or exhausted with trying to work our way into the good graces of God's kingdom?" Asked another way, "Are there any of us who are confident that our work has been enough to earn us a seat in heaven?" As Reformed Christians, the belief is that shared and paid forward by Paul, "We are saved by grace through faith." Our salvation then is not something we earn but are given freely by God. God's grace is a gift available to all people and God wants everyone to know it is a gift given unconditionally. You see, I think God knew it was something we could never earn on our own. But because of God's love for us and because God wants us to have the best, God gives not only good but great.

To be clear, when we spend time talking about our works and service to God and God's kingdom, we are talking about action as a fruit of God's grace and our faith. We are not talking about works righteousness. For when we believe and have faith, the power of

the Spirit will establish roots in us, and those roots will grow to produce a harvest others will witness and benefit from.

In Mark 4:26-29 and 4:30-32, Jesus lifts up the grace and power of God taking the smallest seed and transforming it into the great plant that provides sustenance for all.

Grace is the secret ingredient Jesus talks about in these two parables this morning. The seed growing is the Word of God and the Word of God is the message of God's grace. It is God's grace that enables the seed to grow. It is God's grace that gives nourishment and helps surround the seed with the right soil. If someone were to ask you how you live life the way you do? What is your secret to joy or peace or contentment? What is the key to your life? Grace is at the core. Because without grace, God's grace, we might very well be choked out by other weeds, or picked up by the devil, or tricked into thinking we will grow but never able to bear any fruit.

The first parable likens this kingdom to a feature of plants that is familiar to any gardener or farmer. The gardener can put the seed in the ground but cannot really do anything about its growing. In fact, the gardener has so little to do with making the seed grow that in the parable the gardener sleeps through the process of sprouting and maturation. The kingdom of God is like a sleeping gardener. Or perhaps the kingdom is like a gardener who slept through the growing season but wakes up in time for the harvest.

In case we did not quite get the message with this parable, Jesus offers us a second one. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which though the smallest of all seeds, grows into a bush so large and lush that birds can make nests in its shade.

I really resonated with what commentator Wendy Farley writes. She reflects,

“Trying to make sense of these odd little stories makes me think of grace- a central biblical, Christian, and Reformed idea, that remains difficult to accept or believe. Intimacy with Christ grows in us as certainly and as effortlessly as seeds grow. We have so little to do with Christ's nearness to us that we can just go to sleep. In fact,” she says, “it might be better if we did sleep through the whole thing, snug and safe, resting like babies in our mothers' arms. This trust so deep that we can sleep without anxiety is much more useful to us than fussing over the little seed: dousing it with pesticide, repotting it, clucking anxiously over the amount of sun it has. The kingdom is like this sleepy, restful trust. It is not like the frenetic busyness of works righteousness, and it is not like the anxious attachment to particular moral or doctrinal positions, defending which we gladly expend all our energy.”

She continues, “Being busy and dogmatic makes a lot of sense to us. It fits with our normal way of being human. We achieve all sorts of goods by working hard and

committing ourselves to our values: well-run offices, good grades, better schools, the politicians of our choice, svelte figures, neatly trimmed lawns, and so on. These are mostly reasonable things, and certainly nothing useful would happen if we did not work for it or if we remained indifferent to moral and political issues.” (She would not argue that we really need to be asleep or act like we have nothing to do.)

She clarifies, “It is just that this way of operating is not like the kingdom of God. Our difficulty arises in confusing the way of the kingdom with our ordinary way of doing things. Jesus is calling us to a very different way of being with ourselves, with one another, with the divine, by asking us to recognize that spiritual growth and intimacy with God arises as naturally as seeds growing. The harvest will come without us having to work for it, because God adores us, and it is this love that is the power of growth. It is this love that transforms the tiniest and most impotent-looking seed into a lush bush that gives rest and shade to the singing birds, just as it transforms our tiny, distorted awareness of God into a magnificent luminosity in which we ourselves and all the creatures we meet can rest.”

The secret ingredient to the kingdom of God is God’s gift of grace bestowed as a blessing in all those who trust and believe with faith. For those who have but the faith of a mustard seed, we can say to that mountain be moved into the sea and it will be so. Not because of our power, but the power of Christ who loves us and gives us hope beyond all comprehension. These are kingdom stories. These are kingdom stories worth retelling.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, This is the good news of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Let all God’s children say... Amen.