

St. Matthew's Church

NEW YORK CITY

THE GROWTH

Mark 4:26-34

Second Sunday after Pentecost, June 14, 2009

Growth happens all around us, in people, animals, and plants. It can be measured and charted, and we can describe the best conditions for growth. We know that cells divide and produce more cells. We know that living organisms require nourishment, water, and right environmental conditions. But still growth is some-what of a mystery, or we could call it a phenomenon.

In one of the two parables about the kingdom in today's Gospel, Jesus says that the kingdom of God is as spontaneous as a seed. The farmer can plow and plant and fertilize, but the actual growth is out of any person's hands. "He is baffled and blessed by the mystery of life, spontaneous, self-ordering, and self-developing. Such a mystery is the kingdom of God."

In the second parable, the teaching is clear: "Never be daunted by small beginning, everything must have a beginning. Nothing emerges full-grown." Even the kingdom of God must begin somewhere, and so it did, with the birth of a tiny baby in Bethlehem

The Miracle of Growth: This is the only parable which Mark alone relates to us. The Kingdom of God means; "the reign of God," it means the day when God's will, will be done as perfectly in earth as it is in heaven. That is the goal of God for the whole universe. You can put a seed in the ground, in good soil, with the chance for water and sunshine, and something is going to happen! A little miracle will take place. Life will begin stirring in that little seed, and a shoot will soon appear out of the ground. In God's plan of nature, that's how it works. That plant will in turn produce other seeds and each bearing fruit and seed according to its kind.

Something of a miracle is also involved in the growth of the kingdom of God. Luther, in his explanation to the second petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Thy Kingdom come," writes: "God's kingdom comes indeed without our praying for it, but we ask in this prayer that it may come also to us."

God's kingdom will grow regardless of what we do, and sometimes even in spite of what we do or don't do. John the Baptist scolded the crowds who came out to be baptized, charging them to bear fruit worthy of repentance. He told them not to hide behind the fact of having Abraham as their father, but to remember that "God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." (Luke 3:8).

God's kingdom has no geographical limits, nor can you find it on a map, it is a relationship of faith in a person's heart. The only visibility we have for the kingdom on earth is the Church, and that is not limited to any one denomination. "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground and the seed would sprout and grow he does not know how." (Mark 4:26-27). Sometimes we get the mistaken idea that the growth of the Church is entirely up to us. We try this program and that one, we try to invite and involve people, and we try hard to be friendly and we become discouraged if none of it seems to work. Jesus reminds us that the growth of the kingdom is really in God's hands and not ours.

That is the miracle of growth. We ourselves do not have the power to bring people into the kingdom. God can use us, our abilities, and our personalities, but it is still the Holy Spirit who "calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian church of earth, and keep it united with Jesus Christ in the one truth faith.

The Manner of Growth: how does the seed planted in the field grow? There is a scientific answer, of course. Then there is the poetic answer, described in one of the familiar harvest hymns, "First the blade, and then the ear, then the full corn shall appear. Lord of harvest, grant that we, wholesome grain and pure may be." Since the kingdom of God is people, there is also a human answer.

It is difficult to know when God's people are old enough to gain tolerance for those who are different or who have different priorities. It is hard to know when God's people are big enough to set aside their prejudices for the sake of the kingdom of God. Within the Church there are all kinds of

opinions and all kinds of theologies. We have a tendency to brand as a heretic anyone who does not think as we do. John Wesley was the greatest example of tolerance in the world. "We think," he said, "and we let think." "I have no more right," he said, "to object to a man for holding a different opinion from mine than I have to differ with a man because he wears a wig and I wear my own hair." Wesley had one greeting, "is thy heart as my heart? Then give me thy hand!" It is good for a man to have the assurance that he is right, but that is one reason why he should have the conviction that everyone else is wrong.

The Church of our Lord Jesus Christ is a place in which all the nations of the world meet. A Congregation was building a new church and one the great features was to be a stained glass window. They employed a great artist to paint the picture from which the window would be made. He began the work and fell in love with his task. Finally he finished it. He went to bed and fell asleep but in the night he seemed to hear a noise in his studio; he went into the studio to investigate; and there he saw a stranger with a brush and a palette in his hands working at his picture. "Stop!" he cried. "You'll ruin my picture." "I think," said the stranger, "that you have ruined it already." "How is that?" said the artist. The stranger answered, "You have many colors' on your palette but you have used only one for the faces of the children. Who told you that in heaven there were only children whose faces were white?" "No one," said the artist. "I just thought of it that way." Then the stranger said, "I will make some of their faces yellow, and some brown, and some black, and some red. They are all there, for they have all answered my call." "Your call?" said the artist. "Who are you?" The Stranger looked into his eyes and said, "Once long ago I said 'Let the children come to me and don't stop them, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven, and I am still saying it.'"

The Church is the family of God and that church which began in Palestine, small as a mustard seed, has room in it for every nation in the world. There are no barriers in the church of God. Man made barriers and God in Christ tore them down. Thank God, the Church grows inevitable. With the right conditions, it will grow and produce fruit. Saint Paul's words of encouragement to the Colossians describe what ought to happen: "As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, just as you are taught, abounding in thanksgiving." The manner of growth may not always be in line with our expectations, but it will accomplish God's purposes.

The Maturation of Growth: From a kingdom that began with one man and twelve followers, mostly common folk, it has come to be a kingdom of multitudes that shall last forever. Like the mustard tree that provides a nesting place for the birds of the air, God gathers God own from all over the globe. This kingdom has grace enough for millions, and plenty or room for all believers.

We have a part in this kingdom. The growth takes place out there, somewhere, but it also needs to happen inside your heart and mine, to guide and control our living. You and I are called to grow and mature in our faith. Sometimes the greatest growth comes through the stupid things we say or do. However it happens, you and I are called to “grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ.”