

## “It Grows Hidden”

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**New Testament Lesson:** Mark 4:26-34

**Old Testament Lesson:** Ezekiel 17:22-24

Church growth is like a businessman who moves into a new home. And he decided to hire his landscaper friend to design and layout his yard. You know, lots of new plants and wonderful garden features.

The business man had a great vision for the grounds, but “because he was very busy and traveled a lot, he kept emphasizing to (his friend) the need to create his garden in a way that would require little or no maintenance on his part.” He wanted things to just grow on there own. “Finally, his friend said, ‘Fred, I can see what you’re saying. But there’s one thing you need to deal with before we go any further. If there is no gardener, there is no garden!’<sup>1</sup> Well that makes sense.

And yet, in the parables from today’s New Testament lesson, when it comes to the church Jesus seems to be saying quite the opposite – that the Kingdom of God grows automatically, at least to some extent. Jesus says, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.”

There’s no plowing and hoeing and cultivating in this parable. Just scattering seed, and waiting for growth. This parable is about the waiting of the people as God grows the church. There are several important things revealed in this parable about how God grows the church.

The first thing we see is that the Kingdom of God – which is God’s people, the church – is so different from anything else we know. It can only be pointed to as being similar to that which is known.<sup>2</sup> “The Kingdom of God is as if ...,” says Jesus – it’s “as if.” And a little later he asks, “With what can we compare the Kingdom of God?” It’s “as if” it exists in comparison to other things, in contrast to other ways of being.

The Kingdom of God is different than, let’s say, the Empire of Rome, which is all the kingdom that anyone knew at the time of Jesus. The Empire of Rome was top-down, conquest-oriented, and control-dependant. The powers that be were dependant on having their orders carried out, they sought to take over other territories by force, and they created a system of threats and control to keep everyone in line. They exited in contrast to the church Jesus was planting and nurturing. And yet, if you think about, the ways of the Roman Empire are not too different from how things work today - in our government both local and national, among our corporations, in our schools and families, and even in our churches.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a story by A. Rober Merrill in Steven R. Covey, A. Roger Merrill, and Rebecca R. Merrill, *First Things First: To Live. To Learn, to Leave a Legacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 77.

<sup>2</sup> **Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark*, ISBN 0-8042-0250-8.**

This country is more like the Empire of Rome than it is like the Kingdom of God. And we all know how well things went with the Roman Empire – it collapsed in a blaze of fire. What's to keep that from happening to us? God, that's what, or rather who.

Jesus tells us that when we learn to act more like the Kingdom of God, growth and success follow naturally. And then he tells us how the Kingdom of God works. He tells us the Parable of the Growing Seed and the Parable of the Mustered Seed.

Here's how Jesus describes the growth of the Kingdom of God. "The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head." The stalk, like the trunk of a tree, supports the head of the plant, which then gives rise to the grain. We can think of the people in and around the church as the stalk, or the base upon which any growth occurs. The people come first. Then comes the head or the bud of the plant. This is the leadership who the people bring forth to help lead the church – the pastor and staff, our church officers, and the Presbytery Office, our regional leaders. Once the stalk and the head of the plant are in place, says Jesus, then comes "the full grain in the head." The full grain is the new growth, the seeds that God provides to further the mission and ministry of the church.

All of this happens naturally, says Jesus – "the earth produces of itself...." Well, almost. We do in fact have a role in all of this. Actually two roles, two things that God has left for us to do: scatter seed and harvest or enjoying the growth.

Before the seed begins to sprout, says Jesus, someone must "scatter seed on the ground." What do you suppose is the seed of church growth that Jesus is talking about? ***Our faith.***

In the first chapter of Acts, Jesus says, "... You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Jesus calls us to share our faith, testify to his presence in our lives and in the world. If we are not scattering the seeds of our faith, than the Garden of God – I mean the Kingdom of God – never gets planted, at least not where we are. And if we are scattering seed – if we are participating in the life of the church, telling friends and family what it means to us, and inviting our neighbors in the world to come check us out – then we're doing all that God has asked of us. The rest, we can leave in God's hands.

As the Apostle Paul said of his ministry in Corinth, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth." Although we can always be better see scatters. But still if we are scattering the seeds of our faith, and if the church is watering them through our ministry programs, where's the growth? Why can't we see the faith taking root among our family and friends. When will the pews of this church be getting fuller and fuller, even with the understandable comings and goings of church life?

Where's the growth? Only God knows for sure. And Goes does know for sure about our future growth. That's what Jesus reveals to us in the second parable

we heard today, the parable of the Mustered Seed. The Kingdom of God “is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs!”

Notice the contrast between the tiny mustard seed and the greatest of all shrubs. Now notice what happens to make that tiny seed grow into a great shrub. Anybody? Did you notice what happened: a tiny seed, is sown, and becomes great. There’s not really a lot of detail in between, is there?

We don’t know what happens to the seed, where it is sown, how it gets water, how long it takes to grow. All this happens by the hidden hand of God working in secret. ***It grows hidden*** – in God.

We can’t know when God will reveal the growth that is already taking place. All we can do is stand firm in our confidence that the seeds of faith we do plant will grow, and not only grow, but become great. Now here comes the harvest.

In both parables we heard today, Jesus is careful to point out that growth is not for the sake of growth alone. Growth, whether it’s here in the church, out in corporate America, or more personal like growth of our faith or the faith and Christian fellowship of our friends and family – all such growth happens for a purpose.

“When the grain is ripe,” says Jesus, “at once (the sower) goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.” ***The harvest*** is what provides for ***future growth***. Growth in this church or any growth anywhere in the world takes place to bring about further growth, when it’s aligned with God’s will.

So we as the church are careful to invite people to put to work their time, talents and treasures in growing the church. It’s just the natural order of things, as God ordains it. Take for example the mustard seed.

Jesus says the mustard seed gives rise to large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade,” just as the church extends its ministries of comfort and care, shelter and provision to all in need. As hard as it is for us to be comfortable with our huge role as members of the church and our limited control of its growth and prosperity, this is the nature of church, the way things work in the Kingdom of God.

If you would rather have the authority and power of an Empire like ancient Rome, or the law and restrictions of the Temple like ancient Israel, or even if you’re more comfortable engaged in struggle and conflict and battles like the religious Zealots of Jesus’ day, then I’m afraid you’ve come to the wrong place.

Here, in the Kingdom of God, in the church that Jesus planted, we are called to follow a different pattern of growth and prosperity. It’s a pattern that is more fluid, with the ebbs and flows of nature. It’s a pattern that is more mysterious, with the hidden workings of God. It is a pattern that is always emerging, transforming, and recreating by the will of God, in God’s time, toward God’s purpose. It is a

simple pattern, too simple for our complex world. We simply come to church, participate as we are able – whether that’s through worship alone or also heading up a committee or ministry program – and then we share our faith with those around us.

It’s that simple. That’s enough. And all the worry we do as modern Americans isn’t going to make things happen any quicker. As long as we plant – as individuals – and others water – as the church – then God will provide the growth – in God’s time. I have a challenge for us this week.

Let’s all be sure to give God and the church some seed to work with this week. Let us all be sure to scatter the seeds of our faith in the places where God leads us. Not for our sake. Not because it’s easy to do; it’s not. Not even because it will make the church bigger, though it will, in God’s time. But rather, let’s do what we can to share the faith because that’s the first step in growing the faith – both ours and the faith of others. Amen.

### **Pastoral Prayer**

Merciful Savior, God of redemption, salvation and restoration, we praise you that nothing is beyond your ability to use for your purposes.

You desire our faithfulness, and wholeness. Yes, even our mistakes, failures, and regrets are transformed by you into opportunities for renewal and growth.

Grant us vision and an active hope to shape how we live each day in keeping with your promise and witness to us. May our lives be light to the paths of others.

We pray for those struggling in the heat of the day, with no shelter or adequate resources to care for their physical needs and ensure their safety.

We pray for those struggling with decisions in life, choosing important pathways to follow or turn from.

We pray for those with little choice in life, those who need a friend, those who struggle to make ends meet, those who can’t seem to get ahead in life.

Help all your children, O God, in whatever way best meets their needs. And if we might be blessed as an instrument of your love and care and concern, show us that, too, Lord, and put us in action, to your glory.

We pray this in the name of your Son Jesus Christ, activator of our faith, who taught us to pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;  
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive  
our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,  
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**