

Like Watching Grass Grow

Mark 4:26-34 and 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17

Today is Children's Sunday, which is typically a day for celebrating the young people of the congregation and the church's ministry of planting the seeds of Christian discipleship in their young hearts and minds. Of course, there was nothing typical about this past year. The pandemic erased any chance for holding Church School classes or group activities. Appropriate to how the year unfolded, the theme for the Church School year was "We Walk by Faith and Not by Sight." There were few tangible things to be seen this year where Church School was concerned. As a result, there was perhaps, more walking by faith, than usual. But there was no absence of vision; visions that assumed tangible forms like zoom gatherings, take home Bible lessons and virtual celebrations of Confirmation.

When I was of the age of many enrolled in our Church School, an influential politician—Robert F. Kennedy—expressed the possibilities that come with walking by faith and not sight with these famous words: "Some men see things as they are, and say, 'why'. I dream of things that never were and say 'why not'".

"Walking by Faith and Not by Sight" is also what our scripture readings this morning call us to imagine. Our Gospel lesson presents us with two parables Jesus told. Parables are simple stories about everyday places and objects that can be seen, heard and touched; that help us to conceive of things that are unseen and mysterious. One such invisible and unknowable topic that frequently pops up in Jesus' parables. was something that he called "the Kingdom of God."

Probably the simplest definition for the Kingdom of God would be a state of all creation and all living things existing in the kind of harmony and justice and abundance that God intended from the beginning. Throughout the Bible there are scattered hints of what the Kingdom of God would look like. Some said it would be when lions and lambs could lie down together without fear or aggression. Some said it would look like spears being recycled into pruning hooks and shields being converted into plowshares. At the center of the prayer that Jesus taught us, he prayed for the coming of God's Kingdom as being recognizable when God's will, will be done on earth as it is in heaven, and occasionally by sight. Until that prayer is answered, the Kingdom of God remains something that we experience mostly by faith. No human eye has ever laid sight of it. At best, we are given fleeting glimpses of what it looks like. The two parables I just read though, give us some clues as to how God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven will eventually come about, by a comparison to seeds being planted and growing.

The first parable doesn't have much of a plot. A person scatters some seeds. Eventually the seeds produce crops and the person harvests the crops. End of story. Apparently, waiting to witness the Kingdom of God is literally like watching grass grow. After planting the seeds, the

sower sleeps and rises day after day, going about his business as usual. Until one day, without any further effort on his part, the earth produces a sprout, then a stalk and FINALLY there is something to harvest. If you asked the seed sower how it happens, he couldn't tell you. All he knows is his part in the process, a lot of waiting, and then the reward. But he plants the seed with the faith that something underground and out of sight will eventually result in new life.

The second parable is about one particular kind of seed—a mustard seed. What is remarkable about a mustard seed is its very small size and the very large plant that grows from it. From what I understand about mustard plants, they behave more like an invasive weed than a proper shrub. Before you know it, it can take up so much space that its branches become a place of shelter for many birds.

Taken together, these two parables of growth hint at the mystery, the scope and the inevitability of God's Kingdom. They nail the way that, waiting for God's Kingdom to come can feel as agonizingly slow as watching grass grow. Especially when seen in the light of humanity's history of seemingly endless injustices, inhumanity, and conflict.

Martin Luther King, Jr. expressed an enduring hope in the eventual and inevitable triumph of God's Kingdom when he said that, "The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice." There is a confidence expressed in that image of history bending inevitably towards justice, despite the inability of our limited vision to perceive the curvature of that arc with our own senses. Confidence, even in the midst of a discouraging pattern of what feels like history forever taking two steps back from the Kingdom of God, for every step forward.

Maybe like the confidence Paul was referring to in his message to the Christian community in the ancient city of Corinth. He looked down the long road from where he was to the coming of God's Kingdom; and described it as our being "at home in the body and away from the Lord." But he pointed out that as followers of Jesus, "we are always confident...for we walk by faith, not by sight." That confidence in a hoped for but hidden future; a future that could only be approached by faith, but not sight, grew from the seed of something that was in plain sight. That something, was the love of Christ as it was plainly demonstrated through his giving his life for us on the cross. Paul states, "The love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced" (not just hopeful, but convinced) that "He died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them."

We may lack the vision to see for ourselves God's Kingdom beyond the horizon. But faith in what has been revealed to us about God's nature as it may be seen in Jesus; especially the love God has for us, on display through Jesus' willing self-sacrifice on our behalf, compels us to make it *our* aim to live for others, as well. And each life so lived by faith and not by sight, adds just that much more weight to bending the long arc of history in the direction of the total justice of God's Kingdom.

Quoting again the words of Bobby Kennedy: "Few will have the greatness to bend history itself, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events."

It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped.

Each time a man stands up for an ideal,

or acts to improve the lot of others,

or strikes out against injustice,

he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope,

and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring,

those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

From the vantage point of our brief moment on the arc of history, the incremental progress towards the fullness of the Kingdom of God can feel like nothing is happening. But it's there. Hidden from physical sight, yet waiting to emerge. That's why it is so important that we sow the seeds of the Gospel among our children. So that they can share in that confidence. So that they can learn the why and the how of living for something and someone beyond themselves. Walking by faith and not by sight. So that they can lend the weight of their lives and their faith to bending that curve a tiny bit more in the right direction.

The direction of God's Kingdom.

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