

The Mystery of God's Growth

Mark 4:26-34

INTRO:

Our relationship to Christ is completely due to the work of Christ. We are Christians simply because God has reached out to us in Christ. It's sort of like our name has been called, and we have been summoned to follow the way of the good news. In countless, subtle, though life transforming ways, God reaches out to us. He calls our name. God summons us, clothing us with the grace we need to do the work he calls us to do. As we work we grow. We keep growing.

ME:

I am a growing boy! I hope I won't get any taller, but I am always trying to grow spiritually. *I have finally graduated from the class I was taking at Richmond Hill!* It has helped me grow spiritually and become a better listener. Growing is something we should never stop doing.

YOU:

Are you still growing? If not, **what's your plan?** If you are not growing, you are dying. You don't want that, **right? How will you grow? How will you get better at following Jesus and relating to others?** This morning we will think about growth and about where growth comes from, or how it

happens. Let's turn together to Mark's Gospel and we what God has for us this morning:

let's pray together first...

GOD:

Mark 4:26 He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, 27 and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. 28 The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. 29 But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

30 He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? 31 It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 32 yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

33 With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; 34 he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

WE:

Where exactly should we focus our attention in this passage? There is the sower, there is the seed, there is the harvest. **Who is the sower?** Many assume it is God. After all Scripture is usually about God *first* and us *second*. The harvest in verse 29 is referring to Joel 3:13 where the harvest is the coming judgement of God. **If the sower is God, though, how does God not know how the seeds sprout and grow?**

Maybe the sower is not God. **Is the sower the disciple who is busy witnessing and evangelizing, or scattering seed?** The seed is sown, but the sower evangelist doesn't know how it grows. Since this is Mark's Gospel, we can assume the disciples he shows consistently not getting it are NOT going to be given such an important role as sower.

If the Sower is not God the Father, or the disciple, **is the Sower Jesus, God the Son? Jesus sure threw out a bunch of wordseeds as he went along.** They will grow in time, in spite of the disappointing response to his words at first. there will be growth.

Let's deduce from the choices that the story is about God. God will cause the growth of his own reign. God will do this, we will not. We will join God where we find him at work, but it is God who begins and completes the work.

It is God who causes the growth.

Imagine telling this parable to hard-working farmers who had back-breaking duties. It's a reminder that when all is said and done God's reign is up to God to grow. God is busy, even when God's work is not always visible to our dimly lit eyes. God's growth tends to be slightly noticeable at times. But it happens, and it is up to God.

John Wesley, the father of Methodism, ignited a revival that swept across the world. A major aspect of that revival was Wesley's preaching. He sometimes preached in open fields, sometimes in little Wesleyan chapels where the common people of eighteenth-century England heard him gladly. Early on in his movement he published a book of his sermons that were transcribed by faithful followers and edited for publication. He insisted that his lay preachers read and imitate his sermons before they attempted to preach on their own. In fact, Wesley's sermons comprise an essential part of Methodist doctrine to this day. And yet for most of us, reading Wesley's sermons is a boring activity. It happens when reading the sermons of Luther or Calvin too! The language sounds stilted and dry. The sermons are overly formal and devoid of illustrations, connections with everyday life, or any of those characteristics that we think are essential for sermons today. Of course they are not Wesley's sermons as they were actually preached. These are transcriptions for publication. Something was no doubt lost in the move from spoken to written form. It's still hard to believe that thou-

sands heard Wesley with such gratitude and to such a strong impact. Maybe, just maybe Wesley the preacher possessed an impressive presence in the pulpit. A strong and stirring voice, an imposing stature command the respect of a crowd.

*Wesley must have been a strong figure when he preached, **right?***

Well, forget it. Wesley was a tiny man, even for those days. He was about five feet two and had delicate, subtle features. His voice, while said to be pleasing, was rather weak and frail. **What was there about the man that made his sermons pierce the hearts of his hearers?** A Swedish visitor came all the way to England to hear him preach in 1769 and, after hearing him preach, and hear is his Yelp review:

“He has no great oratorical gifts, no outward appearance” (quoted by Richard P. Heitzenrater, “Wesley, John,” in Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995, 500).

What did Wesley have that made his sermons so powerful? The answer is **nothing**. It was not the man who made the message move people with such power, nor even the message itself. Though Wesley’s sermons are well crafted and theologically heavy. Wesley’s sermons “**worked**”; they **taught**, they **moved**, and they **delighted** (the three characteristics that Au-

gustine demanded of good sermons) because of God's speaking rather than Wesley.

The reasons for any sermon speaking to the hearts, minds, and souls of the hearers are always more theological than anthropological, due more to the nature of God than to the nature of the preacher or the hearers.

Theology means “**God words**” (*theos* = **God**; *logoi* = **words**). But theology is more than just words about God or our talk about the meaning of God. Theology is also God's talk about the meaning of God to us. Christianity is a “**revealed religion**,” meaning it is based upon the idea and the experience of a communicating God. Preaching is not only what we say, even what John Wesley said, or what we hear, even the most astute of us listeners.

*Preaching is also what **God** says.*

Wesley's sermons spoke to people because the God of Israel and the God of the church considered it right to speak to people through Wesley's sermons. We preach because God speaks, and a primary way for this God to speak is through preaching. We preachers are subservient to the power of God to scatter the seed of the word and to give growth. As Paul put it in 1 Corinthians 3:7: “**Neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but the only one who is anything is God who makes it grow.**”
We preachers do not work alone.

THE SERMON IN A SENTENCE:

Keep growing, remembering that God cause the growth, we just need to cast the seed and be fertile soil at the same time.

CLOSE:

I read that so often, you can't see anything happening week to week. Spiritual growth takes place beneath the surface. And there's a sense of timing involved in this change. Let me finish this morning with a story:

A man once bought a home with a tree in the backyard. It was winter, and nothing marked this tree as different from any other tree. When spring came, the tree grew leaves and tiny pink buds. "How wonderful," thought the man. "A flower tree! I will enjoy its beauty all summer." But before he had time to enjoy the flowers, the wind began to blow and soon all the petals were strewn in the yard. "What a mess," he thought "This tree isn't any use after all."

The summer passed, and one day the man noticed the tree was full of green fruit the size of large nuts. He picked a large one and took a bite, "**Bleagh!**" he cried and threw it to the ground. "**What a horrible taste! This tree is worthless. Its flowers are so fragile the wind blows them away, and its fruit is terrible and bitter. When winter comes, I'm cutting it down.**" But the tree took no notice of the man and continued to draw

water from the ground and warmth from the sun and in late fall produced crisp red apples.

Some of us see Christians with their early blossoms of happiness and think they should be that way forever. Or we see bitterness in their lives, and we're sure they will never bear the better fruit of joy. **Could it be that we forget some of the best fruit ripens late?**

Keep growing. Keep learning. Keep making mistakes. Keep growing.

Keep praying, let's do that now...