

"Small Beginnings"

St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, North Africa, in the early 400's A.D.:
"Without God we cannot; without us God will not."

While back in the Midwest for my mother's funeral I got an opportunity to see extended family. We drove down to Missouri for the burial in my father's family plot. On the way back to Chicago we stopped for a brief visit with some of my Mom's family on their farm in Iowa. It is a place rich in memories for me - happy memories of my childhood and youth. 'Ofa and I wandered out into the fields, some with small shoots of corn, others with waving oats, and what were once pastures now thickly covered with grass. Far off to the southern border of the farm stood the forest, greenly lit with new growth. It was all so beautiful.

There is a part of me that still revels in those summers spent on the farm where I witnessed the corn, and oats, and alfalfa growing. When 'Ofa and I lived at the theological college where I taught in Tonga, we had large plots of root crops, pineapple, cherry tomatoes, and vegetables surrounding our house. It always gave me a measure of contentment to see the growth outside our windows. It is amazing to see the fruit that comes of a small seed or shoot planted and watered. I find a great satisfaction in seeing things grow. How about you?

Jesus' often used illustrations taken from agriculture to make a point about God's truth. Like a seed, the kingdom of God grows until it eventually covers the earth.

The Seed Sown

Jesus says the kingdom of God is like seed scattered on the ground, it grows we don't know how. But it inevitably produces a harvest. So too the kingdom will surely come, because Jesus has begun it.

[When the seed reaches maturity, in the parable, it is harvested. The point of the parable is that the kingdom of God will not be curtailed or destroyed but will reach full maturity. Some interpret "harvest" eschatologically in terms of the final gathering of the nations and the separation of the sheep from the goats. But the parable is not referring to the End, but is simply saying that the seed will fulfill its destiny and produce fruit. Indeed, there is a harvest at time's end, but there is also an important harvest to be gathered now: "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few" (Matthew 9:37).]

"The kingdom of God is like this ..." - like what? Is it like the seed that has the principle and power of life in it? Is it like the growth of the seed? Is it like the harvest that results from the seed? Could the kingdom of God be like all three of these?

The Mustard Seed

In his parable of the mustard seed, Jesus says the Kingdom of God is like the smallest of seeds yet produces a bush large enough for birds to nest. Jesus' ministry seemed small, but his salvation extended around the world.

Some Principles of Kingdom Growth

First Principle: The kingdom will be established on earth by God. Contrary to much popular opinion, we do not bring nor establish God's kingdom on earth by our work, our intelligence, or even our gifts. The kingdom of God will be established on earth by God.

In his illustration Jesus says the farmer sows the seed then goes about his normal activities. The farmer does nothing but sow the seed. The parable does not even mention his cultivating, fertilizing, or watering the seed, and he does not even understand what or who causes the seed to sprout. The arrival and establishment of the kingdom of God on earth is the work of God.

Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come." If we brought the kingdom by our own efforts, there would be no need to pray for God to send it. Our responsibility is to sow the Word, and to let it change people and change our social order to one of peace and justice. God creates the seed. God causes the seed to grow. God brings the seed to completion.

Yes, God's people have their part to do. One day a man passed a garden full of flowers and vegetables. He called to the gardener, "What a beautiful garden God has given you!" "Yes," replied the gardener, "but you should have seen it when God had it alone." God brings the kingdom on earth *with* the cooperation of our sowing the seed and reaping the harvest.

The Challenge: in this cooperation the human ego often wants to decide human and divine roles. Some Christians do too much, while others do too little. Some believe they have the vision of God in hand and it is theirs to bring about the kingdom of God on earth. Revolution - Zealots and violence. Legislation - Judaizers: "There ought to be a law against it."

Others sit on their hands testing God to do everything; Pietism - Pharisees and rules of conduct; sects that withdraw from the world; speculation - apocalyptists: claim to know the hour of Christ's return.

We all know that we need a better world. Yet who would believe us if we say, "Just sow the seed of the Word of God and all will be well"? Most would say if the world is going to change for the better, we are going to have to get busy changing it. That's why so many advocate social action and the social gospel. Do you think people will "buy" the idea that a better world depends on God rather than on human efforts?

Early one morning near the local high school football field, a pastor saw a large woodpecker fly to one of the steel poles. The woodpecker began to hammer his brains out against the side of the pole in hopes that he would get a bug or worm for his breakfast. The woodpecker never realized that it was a fruitless enterprise, for he kept at it for an hour...

Trying to establish the kingdom of God on earth by human efforts is equally futile. We must understand our proper role, no matter how difficult it is to communicate a message which seems to contradict our deepest feelings and best impulses. God's kingdom of love, peace, and justice is God's work. Our task is simply to sow the seed and allow God to give the increase.

Theologian H. Richard Niebuhr said, "Man's task is not that of building utopias, but that of eliminating weeds and tilling the soil so that the kingdom of God can grow. His method is not one of striving for perfection or of acting perfectly, but of clearing the road by repentance and forgiveness."

Principle of Hope: When the seed is sown, we can hope for a harvest, and when the mustard seed is sown, we can hope for a great shrub. When a

farmer sows his seed, he can do no more than hope that God will send rain and sun for the seed to grow to maturity and harvest.

Victory will come - for it belongs to God. Kings will die, nations will fall, beasts of evil will be destroyed, and the kingdom of truth, love, justice, and peace will prevail. Like birds coming to a tree, the nations will seek refuge in God's kingdom. This is the message of the book of Revelation, and this truth is implicit in Jesus' words.

The Challenge: Discouragement. Many Christians get discouraged in witnessing and performing good deeds because they cannot see any immediate results of their work. This was precisely the reason Jesus told the parable of the growing seed (4:26--29). For three years Jesus and the Disciples preached, taught, and healed, but no progress could be seen - no change in society, no wholesale repentance, no mass revival. Even a pastor often feels discouraged when he/she sees no change in people's lives resulting from proclamation and pastoral care. Preachers often refer to "the foolishness of preaching," because rarely does a sermon bring immediate change to anyone. Parents often feel the same way about the training of their children.

In this era of instant communication we expect instant results to complex human situations. Faith gives us patience to wait for the kingdom to come. Paul: "I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion" (Philippians 1:6). As the seed of the Word is planted in you, and around you, be patient - with social problems, with personal problems, with your spouse, children, and church. We must understand that the seed of the Word *will* grow and eventually produce results. We need that hope and assurance.

Consider this: a seed can germinate after being stored for centuries; a seed of grain can yield 100 times its weight; a spring harvest is planted in the fall; crop yield cannot be determined as the seed is planted.

When Christians teach, preach, and witness, we sow the seed of the Word in the hope that some day there will be a harvest. The seed of God's Word will produce a harvest, and of this we can be certain!

This brings us to the next principle: Patience. "Rome was not built in a day." Nor does seed produce fruit in a day. The seed grows slowly to maturity. We all know that it usually takes nine months for a baby to be born, while a farmer's seed demands that the farmer wait from spring to fall for the harvest.

For decades, Western missionaries preached almost fruitlessly to the people of northern Nigeria. During this time the Nigerians wanted no religion but their own. Since the late '70s, the people of Nigeria have been turning to Christ by the hundreds so that today's missionaries are desperately calling for help. The seed of the Word of God takes time to produce a bountiful harvest of souls.

In China labored for more than 100 years with small results. There were 7,000 Christians when Mao kicked out Western missionaries in 1949. When China re-opened to the West in 1974 there were 700,000 Christians. Now there are millions. Since 1980, for example, 27,000 Chinese people have become Christians each day.

The Challenge: Impatience. Modern people do not like to wait - we want instant tea or coffee, for the telephone to ring our party

immediately, the television and radio to begin performing without time for warm-up, our computers to zing through all apps, and do all kinds of complex tasks instantly and simultaneously.

We want a better world right now, and we feel that we cannot afford to wait for the world peace. The afflicted cry out for immediate justice: How long, O Lord, how long must we put up with crime, poverty, and ignorance? We want the kingdom of God now, not after we are dead.

In our impatience, we take things into our own hands to bring the kingdom to earth. History is littered with human attempts at building a utopia, always begun with good intentions, and always ending in a dystopia.

The seed of the Word is sown and then we must patiently wait as we continue to sow more seed. Many of us have seen the sign that says, "Be patient with me, for God is not finished with me yet." Parents need patience while the seed of their training produces the growth of good character in their children. "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it."

With God's kingdom patience is the better part of good intentions.

Another principle of kingdom growth: Potential.

The mustard seed suggests that great potential comes in tiny packages. There are also many old adages illustrating this theme: "Big things come in small packages," "Out of an acorn comes a mighty oak," and "Despise not the day of small beginnings." The Bible is filled with stories of God growing greatness from small beginnings. David, the youngest and smallest of Jesse's sons, became Israel's greatest king. Paul, "one untimely born," became the greatest of the Apostles. Jesus, though in the form of a slave, became Lord of the universe. From an insignificant land, at the edge of a great empire, his message spread throughout the earth and still brings salvation to people today.

What can a tiny mustard seed do, or amount to? When you were a child or teenager did anyone ever ask you, "Do you think you will ever amount to anything?" In the seed is the power of life to grow to maturity, or in the case of the mustard seed, the power to become a shrub ten feet high. In Bethlehem's barn a baby boy was born; who could have guessed that he would become the Savior of the world? A picture was taken of a human egg forty hours after conception and it was revealed to consist of only four cells no larger than the head of a pin. Here was a picture of a human being of microscopic size, and yet an adult human being has this tiny beginning. In the parable of the mustard seed, then, we have an unremarkable beginning but an amazing ending.

Here's the Challenge: Smallness.

Our society glories in bigness. Big shopping malls, big churches, big houses, big trucks; we are attracted to bigness. As a church we often compare our small beginnings to some other church's big results. So often we overlook patience and time it takes to reach the harvest and we miss the potential in the small and tiny.

Scholars tell us that the mustard seed is not really the smallest seed, but in Jesus' day it was by tradition the smallest seed. Be that as it may, the mustard seed is so small that the naked eye can barely see it. Yet it can grow large enough to provide sanctuary for many birds. The point is that great things can come from the smallest beginnings. A little faith can move giant mountains, a little love can solve large problems, a little word can give deep encouragement, a little act can save the most desperately lost. God can make something special of a person of

little or no apparent account, while a great institution may result from the dedication of one individual.

If the seed of the Word is causing God's kingdom to grow so fantastically in some parts of the world (I mentioned Nigeria and China earlier), why is there a decrease in Western Europe and in America? In Finland, only five percent attend worship and a mere one percent take Communion. In Western Germany the average Lutheran church has 3,000 members, but has a weekly attendance of only 100. If the Church of Scotland continues to lose 19,000 members each year, she will cease to exist completely by 2030! Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Congregationalists, and other churches in the West continue to report membership loss. Is the Western church failing to sow the seed of the kingdom?

No matter how small the seed when planted, it will grow and produce a bountiful harvest. The kingdom after all, was started by a baby boy born in a barn who grew up in obscurity, and was finally executed as a criminal on a shameful cross. The church began with eleven peasants who held no credentials other than the Holy Spirit. At the beginning, Christians were despised, persecuted, outlawed, and driven underground, and in the second century being a Christian was a crime in and of itself. Could a movement so small one day spread throughout the world? The Bible teaches us (see Revelation) that evil will be conquered and destroyed and Jesus and his kingdom will triumph: "And he shall reign forever and ever." It is not the smallness we honor, but the power of God to bring greatness out of small beginnings. I'm convinced God intends us to live up to that image and expects each of us to grow to more than what we are today. This holds true for each individual and for this church. What we have now is not the pinnacle of God's intention for this place. There's more growing ahead of us.

One final principle of kingdom growth: new life arises from death. Jesus spoke of his own death, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). In the same manner, a disciple lives by the principle: "He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:25). What he meant was a seed cannot preserve itself by isolating itself from the soil, but it is only by dying that it achieves a new, fuller life as a plant with grain, fruit, or flower. To grow and produce, the kingdom of God calls for the people in the kingdom to die in order to gain a new life of productivity. Out of this death grows a resurrection in the form of flowers or grain, and it is for this reason, for example, that flowers are usually placed on altars to signify the Resurrection. There is an eternal principle here: no gain without pain, no success without work, no progress without sacrifice.

The Challenge: The known is seems safer than the unknown.

Most of us won't make a change unless the current situation hurts too much. For the most part we are content with the way things are. But God cannot steer a parked car.

Who likes to take risks, especially if it calls for significant change or even death? Yet we know that many have and still do. Even today Christians in various parts of the world risk suffering and death to plant the seed of God's kingdom. It has been said that, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

For many of us this means dying to our old ways, habits, and even addictions, so that God can grow us into something beautiful. For a church it means the same.

Remember our purpose: sow the seed of the gospel.

Do you see yourself as a sower of the seed of the kingdom of God? What we sow in our lives and the lives of our children has an eternal harvest. They say if you want to see results in one year sow wheat seeds. If want results in ten years sow tree seeds. But if you want eternal results sow the seed of the gospel in people. That's what Jesus did and asks us to do. We've been called to plant the gospel and we'll be held accountable before the seat of Christ. We have ministries in this church that need doing and are waiting for Christians to do them. Let us not forget that we cannot do what God does, and that God will not do what we can do. We are privileged to be God's partners.

God is reconciling the world to Himself, through us. God will establish His kingdom on earth with us. If we ask, God will guide and strengthen us to do our part. "Without God we cannot; without us God will not."