

### "God's Program In Process"

Today's gospel lesson is actually two parables focused on human hope --- a hope that is centered on the Kingdom of God. Mark defines the term "Kingdom of God" to mean the "reign of God," as well as the "Sovereignty of God." The "Kingdom of God" is a biblical term that means that there is a day when God's will will be done as perfectly on earth as it is in heaven. This is God's goal for the whole universe. Though these parables are short, they are filled with unmistakable truths. The first parable tells of the helplessness of human beings; that there is much in this world over which we have little control. Jesus reminds his listeners that the farmer does not make the seed grow. In the last analysis the farmer does not even understand how it grows. The seed has the secret of life and of growth within itself. No person has ever possessed the secret of life; no one has ever created anything in the full sense of the term. We can discover things; we can rearrange them; genetically alter them; but create a seed we cannot. We do not create the Kingdom of God; the Kingdom is God's. However, it is true that we can frustrate it and hinder it. But, also, we can make most situations in the world, where God's Kingdom is given, the opportunity to evolve more fully. But we must not forget --- behind all things is God --- the power and will of God. Today's parables tells us that there is a consummation; there is a time of completion for all things; there is a day when the harvest comes. Inevitably when the harvest comes two things happen -- which are opposite sides of the same thing. The good fruit is gathered in, and the weeds destroyed. Harvest and judgment go hand in hand. When we think of this coming day, the day of completion, the day of harvest --- three things are laid upon us: it is a summons to patience, it is a summons to hope, it is a summons to preparedness. If we live in patience which cannot be defeated, in hope which cannot despair, and in preparation which sees life in the light of eternity, we shall, by the grace of God, be ready for God's end when it comes!

These parables' central point is that God's Kingdom grows gradually and naturally, instead of suddenly and dramatically. As the disciple Mark saw it in his time, the life of this kingdom, this new faith community called the church, small like a grain of mustard seed, will grow and spread until it covers the earth. It is obvious from references such as our lesson today that the function of the seed was appreciated for the marvel and miracle it is. Jesus used it to illustrate potential growth -- how God's kingdom will grow from a tiny seedling community of believers into great, spreading branches. God looks within and works from within -- from within the seed, inside the human heart. Growth starts inside and works up and out. Whether the mighty oak from a little acorn, or a majestic life from the seed of the Gospel, the work of God is always in process.

This is why Christian education must be one of the priorities of every church. Faith is a seed sown within the life of all human creatures. Faith is a seed full of potential for accomplishing great things for God. But unless that faith seed is nurtured and cultivated, unless that seed is given the opportunity to realize its potential, that potential goes untapped. Think about the keyboard of a piano; that keyboard contains in its 88 keys an "almost" infinite range of melodic potential and possibilities. Not only have untold thousands of compositions been written within its range of notes, but also many compositions can be played with various combinations and qualities of instruments and voices, and can be interpreted differently each time they are performed. Such is the vast potential of a piano keyboard. What is true about music is symbolic of the human soul, too. A human life, beginning from an infinitesimally small cell, has potential for greatness and goodness. I believe this to be true of faith. Each of us has a kernel of faith,

and within that kernel is a large potential to do God's will, to live a life full and productive for ushering in the Kingdom of God. Intellect, knowledge, practice will only release so much from that kernel of faith. What more does it take to make faith grow? Listen to this story:

A small fellow, not much over 5 feet tall, applied for a job as a lumberjack in Alaska. The foreman, thinking to discourage him, gave him a large ax, set him before a tree hundreds of feet tall, and yards in diameter, and told him to chop it down. Within minutes the tree had been felled. The amazed foreman asked him where he'd learned to chop trees so powerfully. The little fellow replied, "When I worked in the Sahara forest." "You mean, the Sahara desert." "That was after I got there," said the small lumberjack. The point of the story is that size is less important than spirit, or intelligence, or courage -- a point made when King David was selected at a young age: "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature ... for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." A faith that grows has heart, a heart that belongs to God. Faith grows from the inside out.

Listen to another story about an executive board of one of the leading producers of dog food. Sales of the company product were slumping and the chair was angry: "I don't understand," he shouted as he pounded the table, "we have the best brains in the nutrition business advising us; our art department has designed award-winning labels; our advertising people have put together an aggressive marketing campaign, So, why are sales down? Can anybody tell me why our dog food isn't selling?" There was silence around the table as the various members of the board wilted under the chair's stare. Finally, from the back of the room, a voice piped up with the answer: "The dogs don't like it." This vignette from modern business applies also to the individual Christian and the individual church. In both cases, it is the quality inside -- in the can or in the heart -- that counts.

A third-grader taught the teacher this important truth: The teacher asked, "How many great people were born in our city?" "None," replied the pupil. "There were no great people born. They were born babies who became great people." Greatness may not be within the reach of every one of us, but growth is. We are each capable of being a more mature person today than we were yesterday, and tomorrow can find us further along than we are today. And when we forget this vital truth, we lose sight of the essential meaning of life and the sources of its deepest fulfillment. If a seed in its dark, restless journey underground is not content until it breaks through the mountain of soil and strains ever higher toward the sunlight, will we human beings be content to have our faith remain simply a seed full of potential?

Jesus was a teacher. Jesus taught that true faith comes from within, and admonished the disciples not to concentrate on the outward appearance, as did the scribes and Pharisees. It is God's hope that by following Jesus' example and by practicing Jesus' teachings, His will will be done. Christian education ought to stir the heart and make one hungry to know more. Each child has a small seed of faith, and our role as adult believers within the context of the church, is to be sure that seed is nurtured and that seed of faith realizes its potential. The future and hope for Christ's church today rests in our resolve to provide good, solid education for our children, as well as for everyone. We need to put the same effort into education as we have put into our building and renovation programs, keeping in mind: "...the Lord does not see as mortals see ... the Lord looks on the heart;" the Lord looks within. Therefore, we are left to ponder two questions: Do we have the heart to be a Christian? Do we have the heart to be a church? The potential seed of faith is planted; what remains is the cultivating, the nurturing, the patient task of trusting and obeying God. Amen!