

## **"Living in the Spirit"**

Ezekiel 17:22-24; Mark 4:26-32

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

June 26, 2016 – 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

One of the most obvious things about children is how they grow and grow and grow. Any parent can tell you how quickly they get too large for clothes and shoes. Most outfits don't have time to wear out before they're sized out.

When you think about it, growth is a pretty amazing thing. The body of the average adult contains about 60 trillion cells, and all of these have developed from a single fertilized egg. We're also getting bigger all the time. A new study shows that men today average an inch taller than their fathers, and a full two inches taller than their grandfathers. In 1900 only 5% of men were six feet tall or better; now more than 30% reach that standard.

Women, too, have been growing. A hundred years ago they tended to be 5'2" or less; today they're more likely to be 5'4" or more. Quite a few mothers in this congregation have lost the height battle to their daughters, or will before too long.

Jesus uses the theme of growth in our reading from Mark, which includes the familiar parable of the mustard seed. Perhaps he picked this particular example for his point because the mustard plant was one his hearers knew well. Jesus liked to draw analogies from the world of nature surrounding him.

Here he tells about the kingdom of God, which is not so easily understood. A kingdom is a place where a sovereign rules, where he is clearly in charge. People understand and acknowledge that this one, supreme person is due their loyalty. The land and everything in it rightly and legally is under his control.

Just like an earthly king has his kingdom, so God also claims a kingdom. God's kingdom, though, has no boundaries. It rightfully includes everything that has been created. It's all the people and all the plants and all the animals and every square inch of soil on this earth. It's also the sun and the moon and all the stars in the universe.

Whatever God has made is God's to claim and, Jesus tells us, God asserts this. God is the sovereign over everything that has being—everything in the past, everything now, everything that will be in the future.

Yet, Jesus understood that what people see doesn't readily appear to be under the control of a heavenly king. Many don't acknowledge that God exists, much less reigns over all. There is greed and corruption and deceit abounding. The strong take advantage of the weak and the poor are exploited for the benefit of the rich.

A strong king makes his rule felt and has a way of enforcing it. The reign of a terrestrial king is established and maintained by both force of tradition and force of arms. Everyone knows who is in charge and, if they understand what is good for them, they will show deference and act accordingly.

Now if God is powerful enough to put the world into being, God is certainly capable of forcing us to accept this sovereignty. God can surely make us bow down and accept this lordship.

It's all within God's power and prerogative; yet, Jesus says, that's not the way God wants it to be. God desires the allegiance of creation, but wants it to be a matter of the heart and not of might. God loves us and, in turn, desires our love in return. But love, if it's true, cannot be forced; it can only be given voluntarily.

Make no mistake, God is in control; but God also gives us free will, a gift we have yet to use wisely. Much of what Jesus did was to teach us responsibility—how we should act, how we should behave, how we should treat other people. He revealed to us the character and the will of the Father, our Holy Parent. Jesus' words continue to teach us that today.

So, Christ said, look around and be assured that this is God's world. There is no doubt of that, no other consideration. Yes, evil will try to have us deny it, but that doesn't change what is. God cannot be denied except through ignorance or deception.

Look around, he tells us, and you'll see evidence of this true reign appearing. You'll see places where the world is functioning as it should be, as it ought to be. Signs of God's kingdom are all around.

He said, "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. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head."

The Palestinian peasant then didn't have the scientific understanding of agriculture that we have today. After planting the farmer could do little but wait and hope for the best. There were no herbicides or chemical fertilizers that he could apply. When it says that the farmer "sleeps and rises" it means that he goes about the routines of daily living. The grain is growing in the field largely independent of what he is doing.

So the seed grows essentially on its own and in its own time. The maturing of grain cannot be hurried. This miracle of growth takes place even though the process is not understood. It is seed one day and emerging plant the next. It simply happens because that is the way it has been planned.

Perhaps Jesus told this parable to counteract the view of the Zealots and others that God's kingdom could be ushered in through force. These groups were looking for a Messiah who would compel things to happen. Possibly two of his disciples, Simon and Judas, came out of the Zealot movement. They were immersed in the thought that the prophesied Christ would take charge in a temporal way to usher in the kingdom.

Maybe this parable was a reminder that God's will is manifest in God's own way. Even the Messiah can only do and be what God intends, and God's purpose is not to force this upon the world. It will happen, but in God's way and in God's own time. Perhaps this was Judas' ultimate downfall. He wanted Jesus to be other than he could be... and to do right then.

The kingdom is coming, Jesus says, and it is coming with certainty. One must be patient, however, and wait in confidence that what has been sown will be reaped, that good seed will

ultimately produce good results. It was a comment on his own ministry, too. He knew that people clamored for instant changes, instant results. That simply was not the way it would be. The kingdom of God is not to be a social movement; yet, as hearts are transformed, the kingdom **is** made more visible through righteous living.

Jesus said, "[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, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

A mustard seed is about the size of a pinhead. The shrub at full growth is about ten feet high. The difference is obvious and striking. In this parable Jesus does not concern himself with the way this growth happens, but contrast its beginning with its end result. The change is nothing short of miraculous.

Perhaps what Jesus intends is to show that out of the most insignificant beginnings, which may be a mere nothing to the human eye, God is bringing about a mighty kingdom which will embrace all the peoples of the world. Practically unnoticed things initiated in our Messiah's ministry are contrasted with the great results promised in the time of fulfillment. God's intention will be done; God's full kingdom will come.

Contrast this with discouragement we feel when we can't see visible results from our efforts. We consider that there should always be a direct correlation between what we do and what happens. That's always been prevalent in human thinking, but perhaps is even more accelerated in our day. Technology asserts that when we push a button we should see instant results. If that doesn't happen, then whatever it is must be broken. If it can't be fixed, throw it away.

When it comes to living in the Spirit, Jesus' words tell us that God is fully in charge of the universe, that God's sovereignty will be acknowledged in time on earth, that small beginnings often have great consequences, that we should not become discouraged when the pace and improvement is not what we would like to see. God is great and God does bring about great things when the time is right.

What are we to do when the kingdom only slowly shows itself upon the earth? I believe it is to let God's kingdom come about in us. It is to personally acknowledge God's sovereignty in our lives and to live accordingly. It is to make of ourselves a faithful witness.

Each righteous life is a seed planted for the full blooming of the Kingdom. Yet even small beginnings, when they come from God, will—in time—bring about desirable results. Of that promise, Jesus has assured us.