

Scripture:
1 Corinthians 3:1-9
Mark 4: 26-32

God's Growth

I am loving this image of seeds. Normally this isn't the time of year we are talking about seeds. Right now we are usually talking about leaves falling from trees and letting go, and we will get to that I promise but as I consider where we are in life right now both personally, with my friends and neighbours and throughout the world I can't help but feel called to plant new hope and new life. Because like I said last week hope and faith feel like all we've got right now and if I let go of either of those I don't want to imagine where I will find myself.

I am holding this image of the seed and the bulb and the seedling quite deeply right now because perhaps it is the journey God is taking me on and yet I hope it speaks to you too.

Last week we planted bulbs in the ground in a week that felt like fall. This week it feels like summer again and so although it actually is fall it is a little easier to imagine scattering seeds on the fertile soil. You might even try it because in 2020 who knows exactly what God is up to. All I know is it seems something holy is afoot.

The only thing I am certain about this year is that things are going to change in ways we never asked for or imagined. Another thing I know is that we can either learn and grow in this time or we can go into a deep dark struggle. Btw depending upon the day I find myself doing both so far this year (which come to think of it is closer to the end now than the beginning and although I would dream it to be I don't imagine that January 1st 2021 will mean the world feels upright again - it will keep spinning just as it is and we are going to keep needing to hold on to that which secures us and that is the whole point of what our scriptures are telling us today).

I want to talk about some things that God just might be doing with the seeds being planted.

What if I were to say to you that I think God is all about growth this year?

Maybe even about growth in the church. Now hold on with me.

The problem is when people talk about church growth, often they talk about purely numeric growth; more members in our churches, more money in our budgets and lets be honest we all hope for some of that but when the scriptures talk about

growth they are more often than not talking about spiritual depth. About the growth of our lives and our souls, that will bring about the growth of the kingdom of love. The issue that Paul is addressing, is that the Corinthians have not grown in the spiritual depth. They are still as infants in Christ. The gospel is supposed to be something that permeates more and more into every facet of our lives and yet the message of Jesus Christ seems to remain only at surface level thing for the Corinthians. For God and for Paul and dare I say for most pastors and church leaders that is what is of primary importance. How are your lives transformed by the good news of Jesus? OH sure numeric growth we can pray for that too but that is so that the world living in the midst of more hope, peace, joy, love, justice, truth, mercy.. and the list goes on...kingdom come kind of stuff.

This was a problem in Corinth and it is a problem for Squamish United Church and for many churches today we can get stuck in conversations about external numbers rather than internal, God given growth. In fact in the early church Acts definitely talks about growth but it is about lives transformed always.“

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.” Acts 2:41, “14 And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women,” Acts 5:14,“7 And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.” Acts 6:17, There are about 20 incidences of people coming to faith in the book of Acts alone. The principal of this is that God intends for church to grow, it’s not something we are putting on God. It’s something that God will and does accomplish. The problem in Corinth is that there is a disease in the body. If you remember all the way back to 1:10-16, Paul began to identify the symptoms of this disease. Just as if you went to the doctor, the doctor would ask you a lot of probing questions to diagnose what is going on in your body.

So, Paul says I have heard this report, there are divisions in your midst. You are splitting up into factions. Some of you having been aligning around me, Paul says, I was not crucified for you, you were not baptized into my name. Others were following after Apollos or Peter. Others have pridefully boasted that I follow Christ, which is the right idea and wrong motivation. Then in seventeen, Paul begins to diagnose the underlying issues. He begins to explore what is actually wrong, you’re feeling these symptoms but there’s something deeper going on. So, in verse seventeen he begins to talk about wisdom.

And in the eyes of the world God’s wisdom doesn’t look very pretty. It’s a dying, being buried, being ridiculed. Jesus Christ and him crucified, the world looks upon that as weakness. Yet Paul says to those that are being saved, to those in whom the Spirit of God is at work, that’s not foolishness, but that’s the power of God and the

wisdom of God. God knows things in our lives must die so that we can truly live, truly be transformed.

The problem is Paul says you've been relying too much on what looks glitzy and glamorous and exciting and powerful, according to human eyes and human years and human understanding. And the Spirit of God has not yet penetrated deeply enough into your hearts for you to see the person and work of Jesus the Christ. Fortunately Paul doesn't stop there he begins to apply the remedy. He says, But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. 1 Corinthians 3:1-9, The Corinthians are still "fleshy" because they're acting as though Christ has not changed how they live. They have failed to realize how the gospel has brought a new creation. They are still acting as though the pursuits and the goals of power and greed and pride should define the church. They want to keep being who they always were and they argue with anyone who sees things differently. Paul says, they are acting like little children.

Now if we are honest most of us will recognize something of ourselves in these Corinthian ways. Congregations can become divided and distracted by old allegiances to former leaders and to former ways of doing things, and by old hurts and old fights. We so easily think that those things need to define us. The church too often adopts the culture's claims about what ought to be valued and pursued as the centre of our identity: power over others, prosperity, and some safe distance from those who would make that prosperity uncomfortable. We often resist being shaped by the God like wisdom.

Paul's solution to this is a theocentric view both of the church's leaders and of the church's own identity. In verse 6, putting the Corinthians' bickering over apostles into proper perspective, Paul says that he planted a seed, and Apollos watered it. But God "is giving the growth," The labor of Paul or of Apollos would have been fruitless if God had not been at work all along. We can engage in ministry only in the trust that God is going to be at work, in and through what we do, to bring the growth that God wants. If the work we are engaged in is built on some other conviction, it isn't really ministry of the gospel at all, but is focused somewhere else and with other goals in mind. The work of the church and mission should never be about our mission it should always be about Gods.

Our understanding and our practice of mission in all its senses should be shaped not by our culture's assumptions about consumerism and the associated assumption that "mission" means looking like the best religious deal on the block. Mission must not be shaped by our culture's lionizing of "entrepreneurship" and its assumption that we are called to "sell" the gospel.

Rather our calling is to plant the seeds of God's mercy, which will grow by God's action and in God's time. We are called to nurture and water that mercy with compassion and love and justice, and leave whatever growth, in whatever form, to God.

I am not always a fan of Paul, partly because he speaks so boldly and I'm not always good at speaking boldly myself but sometimes we need to be spoken to boldly don't we. Sometimes when we are acting immature, or like children as Paul said, sometimes when we are in a new season of life we need to be reminded of whose we are and what work is ours. That brings us to our passage in Mark. "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. We know that God grows the harvest but sometimes we forget. I imagine those seeds being planted and God being at work inwardly while we water and tend the soil and seeds. Until the growth starts to happen and the embryo starts to break through that dry seed coat. It's 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." We plant and tend the seed and God does the work of transformation our lives when we allow it.

Perhaps in this season of the fall of 2020 as we begin new life and ministry it is a good time for us to be reminded that neither the congregation nor the ministry belongs to us. The church does not belong to culture or the market place. It doesn't even belong to particular theologians or particular denominational confessions. The church belongs to God. The church is called to see, in and through (and sometimes despite) us, that God is the one who is bringing growth, maturity, and the full flowering of the seed that has been planted through the preaching and the living of the gospel.

I don't know about you but that gives me a lot of hope. It is so easy for us to preach and teach about all the things we have to do, and we all have important roles but if we are not first in touch with the spirit and listening to where she is taking us it we become about us and our kingdom and that will always fail. We are called to be living in the hope of God's kingdom come here on earth today and always. So plant the seeds of mercy, grace, hope and love and till the soil while you trust God to transform our lives and the lives around us in God's kingdom come time.

Amen.