

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
11th Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Watching the Grass Grow

Mark 4:26-34; Ezekiel 17:22-24

As most of you know, I grew up in Atlanta, about 20 miles outside the city.
That means that, like the majority of middle class Americans today,
I grew up in the suburbs.

Those who prefer city life,
or who prefer the wide-open out of doors,
would say that life in the suburbs is about as interesting as
“watching the grass grow.” – that is, really boring.

Well, whether you find life in the suburbs to be too dull, or too hectic,
or just about the right pace, one thing is for sure:

we do watch the grass grow; ours and the neighbors’.
And for many in the suburbs it usually seems that
the grass is always greener in the yard across the street;
or if not that yard
some yard we’ve picked out to compare our own yard to.

The other thing about watching the grass grow,
is that it always seems to grow either too quickly, or too slowly.
Too quickly, if it’s raining all the time and the one sunny day in a month,
you’ve got work all day and meetings all night
and the jungle in your front yard just keeps growing.

Too slowly, for me, usually happens when I’ve just put down
new seed in the bare spots.

For some reason I don’t understand
my neighbors new seed patches
always seem to come up faster, greener, and more evenly
than mine.

It’s no help being a perfectionist when you’re watching the grass grow:
you have to just let it happen the way it’s going to happen;
there’s only so much you can do about it.

In fact, what usually happens to me is that I finally get disgusted
and give up watching
and just figure I’ll have to live with things the way they are,
with ugly, dead bare patches blemishing my green lawn,
until one day I’m mowing and I notice,

Wow! Behold! The grass grew when I wasn’t looking,
and the bare patch is mostly covered over,

if not gone completely.

There are a lot of things in life
that are like watching and waiting for the grass to grow.
Growth, and the emergence of new, healthy life,
can often be a painfully slow process.
If we are impatient, we may be tempted to give up hope,
and begin to think the growth and change will never, ever happen.

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But Jesus parables today invite us to take a longer view.

Jesus tells two parables about the kingdom of God.
Now, first of all, let's not think too simply about the kingdom of God
as a place – the place we'd like to go when we die.
The Greek word here also refers to the *power* of God,
or the *authority* of God.
So to live in the kingdom of God, to enter the kingdom of God,
is to live under God's reign, under God's authority;
it is to benefit from the benevolent power that emanates from
God who rules over all.

Jesus teaches us that the workings of the power of God
in us and in others and in the world around us,
is like the growth of a seed that someone scatters.
Now there is always more than one way to read a parable,
but let's say that the one who scatters the seed is the Christian,
you and I scattering the seeds of the gospel,
speaking words and doing deeds that bear witness to Christ.
We scatter these seeds into the earth of our lives,
the lives of others, and out in the world.

Once the seed is out of the hand and into the soil,
it's growth becomes a mystery to the one who scattered it.
All that can be done is to go to bed and get up day after day
and wait for the miracle of life and growth.

Of course, we understand a lot these days about how seeds grow;
about the growth and division of cells,
the process of photosynthesis, and so on;
But for those who truly appreciate science,
these processes only increase the marvel,
and make the mystery and miracle of growth and life

much more profound.

And we have found more ways to be involved in this growth:
we have a variety of methods of irrigation,
to get water to the growing plants.

Today, we use all sorts of chemical and organic fertilizers
to intervene and enhance the growth and division of cells.

Still, even though we have found more ways to contribute to the process,
the process of growth and life remains a mystery,
and something we finally cannot control.

That – that lack of control – is, perhaps, the threat of this parable.

Yes, the threat!

Parables were not, for Jesus, just pretty illustrations of his principles.

They were disturbing stories that threatened the worldview and the power
of many who heard them.

They didn't crucify Jesus for telling pretty stories about plants.

Jesus says that the Kingdom of God is about

giving up a false sense of control,
giving up the anxious striving and manipulation and force,
as if we ourselves can produce life and keep it
and even save it.

Eduard Schweizer understood this parable to stand

“in opposition to any form of doubt or care which,
instead of waiting for God to fulfill his promise,
endeavors to force the coming of the Kingdom or to build it --
by a revolution like the Zealots,
by exact calculations and preparation like the Apocalyptists,
or by complete obedience to the law like the Pharisees.
Thus the parable is asking if we are willing, for Jesus' sake,
to wait with him for God to do what [God] is sure to do,
and if we are willing to wait with the carefree attitude
which is becoming to the children of God,
without any spiritual maneuvering or misguided efforts.

To build one's life in this way –
entirely upon God's promise
and no longer upon one's own ability or inability –
demands all the feeling, thinking, doing,
and speaking of which we are capable.”ⁱ

So to wait and watch for the kingdom of God isn't about “doing nothing.”

Growth in the Christian life, and growth in Christian relationships
isn't about being passive and doing nothing.

Growth in the Christian life and in Christian relationships
is about discerning what to do and what not to do.
It is, perhaps, giving up the final outcome, in trust, to God,
and being as faithful in the waiting as we know how to be.

Then there is this parable of the mustard seed.
The mustard seed was a traditional symbol of something small.
It is used in Matthew and Luke to illustrate small faith.

But the mustard seed has another significance
which may be just as relevant to the kingdom of God.
The mustard seed and bush, is considered by some to be a *weed*.
Certainly, at least, in contrast with the great cedars that were described
in our reading from the prophet Ezekiel today,
which God intends to plant on the mountain height
so that they grow and become great noble trees,
the mustard seed grows into a bush which is not quite so noble,
not quite so impressive in comparison.

The mustard plant, as I understand, is a pretty ordinary,
pretty commonplace, plant in Palestine,
not grand and glorious.

Like sagebrush in the desert, or – I don't know –
crabgrass or dandelions in my suburban lawn.

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So when we are watching for God's kingdom to break forth in our midst,
when we are longing for the life of God to emerge in our daily living,
when we are hoping for the joy of God to sing in our relationships,
when we are waiting for the harvest of blessing to be gathered
as a result of all our hard work
Jesus parables can teach us a few things.

First, we might be making a mistake if we are looking for
something grandiose, something extravagant,
something impressive, something that would make the news,
in answer to our prayers.

When we pray, the answers to our prayers may at first be imperceptible,
ridiculously small.

As we grow in our relationship with Christ, and with each other in Christ,
our progress may seem like nothing,
so that we're ready to give up the effort.

But this parable suggests that we might begin to consider the possibility
that the thing we thought was a weed,

is actually a mustard plant:

the person, the relationship, the job, the community,
that we have been despising, ignoring, trying to be rid of,
might be the very location
of the inbreaking kingdom of God in our lives.

Another thing is this:

As it turns out, we really cannot control the growth of God's kingdom.
We cannot rush it, nor delay it, no matter what we do.

The power of the gospel is at work beyond our knowledge,
beyond our control,
and beyond our efforts.

The Reformer Martin Luther once said

"While I drink my little glass of Wittenberg beer
the gospel runs its course."

I agree with the German theologian Helmut Thielicke that

"that is truly the finest and most comforting thing
I ever heard said about beer."

Thielicke goes on to say,

"New life comes into being by letting God do God's work.
Luther could cheerfully and trustfully step down from the pulpit;
he doesn't need to go incessantly crying, shouting,
and roaring around the country.

He can quietly drink his little glass of Wittenberg beer and trust in God.
The Lord 'gives to his beloved in sleep.' "

Jesus invites us to release our anxiety

about all those aspects of our life we are trying to control,
and instead to find rest by entrusting
our lives and our relationships and our world
to God's hands.

That doesn't mean to be passive or inactive,

but to trust God to do God's part in the midst of our faithful activity.

And finally, the thing about watching stuff grow

is that it is often easier to see the growth looking back
than in the moment.

Mary Ellen took a picture of our house when we moved in 5 years ago.

Not long ago we pulled that picture out

and were amazed at how small that Blue Spruce used to be,
only 5 years ago. It has really grown!

And the little Arbor Vitae I planted at the corner of the house
that we were sure wasn't going to make it through that first summer,
is green and supple and growing taller every year.

And the same goes for seeing old pictures of our children.
I remember vividly the days
when I thought I'd be changing diapers for the rest of my life.
That phase of parenthood only lasted for about 7 years for us,
but I thought we'd never get through it.
Now look at them! Looking back, I can see it.

God's life *will* emerge among us.
Indeed, it is happening all the time;
even now; even before we woke this morning.

May God give us the patience to let God's life happen,
and help us find the switch that turns off
our incessant, compulsive, anxious striving,
so that we might *rest* – truly and deeply rest –
in the life-giving power of God.

ⁱ Eduard Schweizer, *The Gospel According to Mark*, p. 103.