

*Silent Growth While We Are Sleeping*

I'm usually not one for object lessons, but this gospel reading just cries out for one. This is a tomato seed and this is a tomato. Compared to the tomato, the tomato seed is tiny, nearly infinitesimal. And the tomato looks nothing at all like the seed. The same that is true for the mustard and tomato seeds is true for cucumbers and peppers and pumpkins and whatever else you might be growing in your gardens. From a tiny seed grows a huge plant and edible fruit. It's really quite miraculous when you think about it. Maybe that's why some people enjoy gardening so much. In a garden you get to see a miracle every day.

We can describe how plant growth occurs and we know what conditions make growth optimal, but we ourselves can't really make anything grow, it's a natural process, something God engineered in creation. We know that plants need sunlight and water, and we can chemically formulate photosynthesis and we can microscopically document cell division, but we cannot explain why these things happen. Why do plants grow in these ways and not others? Why can't we create life from non-living elements? It's a mystery.

One way to look at Jesus' parable about seeds and plant growth is to see them as an analogy for the church. From a very humble beginning -- a dead man on a cross and twelve confused followers -- grew a great religion of more than two billion people some 2000 years later. The church today looks very different than it did after that first Pentecost Sunday. How did the

church develop and grow? It wasn't through human will or skill. It was all the work of the Holy Spirit. Again, as with the seeds and plants, we can describe church growth, and we can discern what conditions make church growth optimal, but we ourselves cannot really make a church grow.

Many authors have written many books on how to grow churches and, while some of them can be helpful, there is no sure-fire one size fits all church growth program. There is neither one style of worship nor one kind of advertising campaign that can guarantee church growth. I was very much impressed by a book written a few years ago called *Natural Church Growth* that emphasized that all growth in the church comes from God, but that there are some things we can do to prepare the soil for the seeds God sows. Those are things such as doing worship well, whatever style that worship happens to be, and praying with sincerity, and training lay leaders to use their spiritual gifts. But still it is the Holy Spirit that leads visitors to walk through the church doors for the first time and it is the power of the gospel that makes them stay, not any human power or program.

The church provides a home for all sorts of people, even as the mustard bush provides a home for the birds of the air. Last week we said that the church is catholic with small "c" meaning universal. And indeed the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church welcomes people of all races, nations, languages, and backgrounds. Everyone is welcome here. Which is not to say that we do not confess a certain creed and set of beliefs; we do. Which is not to say that we do not believe that the Word of God calls us to certain kinds of attitudes and behaviors; it does. But all people are welcome here, even sinners, especially sinners, to hear the Word, receive the sacrament,

and know that in Christ their sins are forgiven. Moreover, the church is in the business of transforming lives, changing them, healing them, setting them on the right pathways.

Sometimes clichés are clichés because they are true and the old saying, “Churches aren’t museums for saints, they are hospitals for sinners,” is most certainly true. We have many talented and successful people here among us, but everyone among us also has some sort of problem if you dig deep enough. Who here hasn’t suffered through some kind of health problem, or hasn’t mourned the loss of a loved one? Who here hasn’t been troubled by anxiety or depression, or other thoughts and feelings or compulsions and addictions beyond our control? Who here has not transgressed God’s commandments and fallen short of the glory of God? We all have, but there is room in the church for all of us, and it’s a safe, secure, peaceful place. It’s a place for us to live and grow and produce righteous fruit.

The traditional imagery of the church says that God is our Father and the Church is our mother. That’s a good image because human birth is itself a miracle. Even more miraculous than the growth of a plant is the development of a human being. Two human cells, two human seeds if you will, combine to create a walking talking, thinking, loving, God-praising human being. Think of the divine mystery of human development as those two tiny cells go through so many divisions somehow forming different tissues such as muscle and bone, heart and brain, and producing all the characteristics of a unique one-of-a-kind individual, characteristics even evident in the womb. Human life is so very precious. Human life should never be taken for granted or carelessly discarded. Human lives, these holy

mysteries that God begins, should be loved and nurtured and brought to full fruition.

Even more miraculous still is our birth into eternal life. Jesus speaks of our earthly bodies as being like seeds that will produce marvelous resurrection bodies. We do not yet know what our bodies will be like in the resurrection, but we can be sure that they will be as different and greater as the tomato is different and greater as compared to the seed. Our lives here may be unimpressive and underwhelming sometimes. But God has huge plans for us, in this life and the next, and we catch just a glimpse of our future in eternity in this life. We taste it in the sacrament, we feel it in a loved one's touch, and, on really good days, we experience it in the embrace of the church, this big bush full of birds.

So let's go back once more to that object lesson we began with. This seed is you; and this tomato is you, you in Christ, you in the church, you in eternity. God is doing great things for you. Relax and let it happen. Welcome the changes and growth God has in store for you. Amen.