

ENCOURAGED TO GROW IN CHRIST

Mark 4:1-34

Sermon for Peace Church

August 30, 2009

PURPOSE – to encourage people to grow in Christ and become a community that encourages that growth in others.

MAIN IDEA – We grow in Christ by believing that is God’s purpose in us; by receiving the seed of His Word in Jesus; by tending the soil of our heart, leading to life of blessing to others.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Our church vision is that Peace Church would be a place where everyone is:
INVITED TO BELONG AT THE FAMILY TABLE
ENCOURAGED TO GROW IN CHRIST
EMPOWERED TO SERVE CHRIST’S KINGDOM

This morning, as we prepare for a new program year, we focus on the second of those statements:

= becoming a place where people are encouraged to GROW IN CHRIST.

2. Our Scripture lesson will be from Mark 4. You can turn to it in a moment.
_____ will lead us in reading it.

Before we do, let’s pray in song for a blessing from Word.

3. SCRIPTURE – **Mark 4:1-34**

II. THE PROMISE OF GROWTH

1. Are you growing in Christ?

We have here 3 parables about growing in Christ. That's who the seed of these stories is – the PERSON OF JESUS.

- He is the seed of the Kingdom of God on earth (as I taught last week). He is heaven come down among us ... born within us.
- Christian growth is ALL ABOUT HIM:
= becoming more like Jesus in character - thought, desire, will & deed!

(i) We want to be a place that encourages people to grow in Christ because that's the ESSENCE of the kingdom of God.

Christianity is not about attending church & its programs. Christianity is NOT A LIFESTYLE! It's about JESUS BEING FORMED IN US! ... *Are you growing in Christ?*

2. Let's be encouraged to do so by first looking at the middle of these 3 parables:

- The Parable of the Growing Seed is VERY ENCOURAGING because it tells us is that GROWTH IS NATURAL. IT HAPPENS beyond our labor – because it is the work of God!

“Night & day – v. 27 – whether the farmer sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts & grows, though he does not know how!”

A. It reminds me of the grass & weeds that grow in the cracks of my driveway – how does it get there? How does it grow? -

Not by my tending! I'm always trying to yank it out!

(i) LIVING THINGS GROW. IT'S NATURAL!

The kingdom grows because GOD GIVES THE GROWTH.

- As Paul writes in 1 Cor. 3 – *I planted the seed, Apollos water it, but God made it grow!*”

3. And GROWTH is the PROMISE of God for everyone in whom the seed of Jesus lives! This lines up with many other Scriptures:

(i) Romans 8 – *We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to His purpose.*

What is that purpose? ... *For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son – that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*

When God's at work in your life, His purpose is to conform you to the image of His Son.

(ii) 2nd Corinthians 3:18 describes this as a JOURNEY from one degree of glory to another: *"We all, with unveiled faces, behold the Lord's glory (IN JESUS), are being transformed into his likeness with every increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."*

(iii) This growth is promised to Christians – Philippians 1:6 – *He who began a good work in you WILL BRING IT TO COMPLETION until the day of Christ Jesus.*

4. So to be a place that encourages growth in Christ, the first and most important thing we're called to do is to BELIEVE this promise of God. It is to live by FAITH.

It is to call people to believe in a God who is at work in their life according to His good & sovereign purposes.

"He watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven. In fact, all things must work together for my salvation (which is Christ in me)!" Q&A # 1 – Heidelberg Catechism

(i) To encourage growth in Christ is to introduce others to the mighty God who is in charge of that growth process.

It is to help people get their eyes off their own perspectives of life – their own goals & anxieties - and to help them believe God's purpose for their life – which is to conform them to the image of His Son!

A. Growth happens when we keep our eyes fixed on that God and that cause.

- With such faith in place, we not only ask, “Am I growing in Christ?” ... but also “How is God TODAY growing me in Christ?”

= What parts of His courage is God calling me to embrace? His purity of heart? His love for others? His peace of mind? His training of disciples? His formation of community? His mission? His character?

GROWTH IS GOD’S WORK & PROMISE ... believe it!

That’s the first principle tied to our vision statement.

A second & third principle can be found in the FIRST PARABLE.

- RECEIVING THE SEED OF JESUS & TENDING THE SOIL OF THE HEART!

II. RECEIVING THE SEED OF JESUS

1. The first parable is the MOTHER of all parables.

Parables are earthly stories with heavenly meaning. In verse 13, Jesus said, “If you don’t understand this one, how are you going to understand any?!”

(i) The farmer sows the seed GENEROUSLY – on all types of soil: Hard, Rocky, Thorny. But it’s only in the GOOD SOIL that the seed of the Word of Jesus GROWS – producing an abundant crop – 30, 60, even 100 times what was sown!

That soil Jesus says (v. 20), “Hears the word, ACCEPTS it, and produces a crop.

The Greek word, “ACCEPT”, has the sense of receiving & staying “alongside” your life – PARA-DEKOMAI = “with” you. If you get a “PARA-SITE”, it stays with you. It influences you. It bears fruit = BAD fruit.

But the “accepted” SEED OF JESUS brings GOOD FRUIT.

2. How do we receive that Word?

Take a look at the golden insert in your bulletin. Listed on the right hand side of that page are 365 chapters of Scripture!

The PRIMARY means that Jesus is sown in our life is through SCRIPTURE. Here are 365 seeds. It's not every chapter of the Bible – there are over a 1000 in total. But these are KEY ONES that help us get an overview of the Bible.

365 – because the design is like those vitamins – “one a day”.

(i) In the year ahead, beginning 09/09/09 with Gen. 1, we want to encourage you to grow in Christ by reading one chapter a day.

We're going to do this TOGETHER. We want to UNITE in the Word. There's encouragement that comes from unity.

A. And WEDNESDAY NIGHTS will become an opportunity to check in with one another on this seed-reception, at our midweek service.

Having read 7 chapters from the week past, I'll draw a message from those chapters – & perhaps we'll have some sharing, we'll encourage one another.

= ONE BOOK / ONE BODY!

(ii) By reading Scripture, we meet the story of Christ, the PERSON of Christ, the character of CHRIST, the skills of CHRIST, mission of Christ, the power of Christ

The PRIMARY means we receive the seed of Christ is through Scripture.

3. But it's not the ONLY means.

(i) God speaks to us through PEOPLE & CIRCUMSTANCES.

Imitate me, as I imitate Christ – Paul wrote to the Corinthians, as a leader of the Church. The seed of Jesus comes to us through the positive witness of others.

- The church is about such relationships

(ii) Trials & circumstances of suffering too are means whereby Jesus is sown into our life. We grow through pain.

Joni Erikson writes, *“When life is rosy, we may slide by with knowing about Jesus, with quoting and speaking of Him. But only in suffering will we KNOW Jesus.”* ... God could have kept Joseph out of jail, Daniel out of the lion’s den, Jeremiah from the slimy pit – but He didn’t. He let those problems happen, and every one of those persons was drawn into Christ as a result.

(iii) Through CREATION too God sows the seeds of Christ in us. The universe was made THROUGH THE SON. It’s His ARTWORK. It bears witness to Him.

“Go to the ant – Prov. 6 – consider its ways, you sluggard, and be wise! It has no commander, overseer or ruler – yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest.”

Nature contains the wisdom of Christ. That’s why we study – science & math, history & languages.

“Creation is a dazzling theater of God’s glory” – stated John Calvin!

A. Jesus saw truths of the kingdom in nature & business. That’s how He formed his parables.

4. So God uses many means to sow the seed. But Scripture is His definitive and primary Word. Through it we learn to see the truth of Jesus, as God also uses many means to sow into our life.

In the middle of these parables, Jesus declares that truth is like a LAMP that’s been put on a stand. Now that He has come, it is not hidden. LIGHT SHINES EVERYWHERE!

... if you have “eyes to see & ears to hear”

IV. TENDING THE SOIL OF THE HEART

So let’s shift to a 3rd principle – We encourage growth in Christ by becoming a people who TEND THE SOIL OF THE HEART

1. GROWTH MEANS CHANGE.

A growing plant or person, a growing church changes.

Openness is essentially the willingness to grow, writes Grady Nutt. It is a distaste for ruts, eagerly standing on tip-toe for a better view of what tomorrow brings. A man once bought a new radio, brought it home, placed it on the refrigerator, plugged it in, turned it to WSM in Nashville (home of the Grand Ole Opry), and then pulled all the knobs off! He had already tuned in to all he ever wanted or expected to hear.”

(i) That’s what a hard heart is like!

A hard heart REJECTS the word of Jesus – by saying, “This is my character. It’s what it is (kind of like it that way) – NO CHANGE!”

- This is my marriage / church (you name it) ...

A. Jesus teaches that Satan gets WELL-FED with these kind of attitudes – like the birds who snatch the seed from the hard path.

So we encourage growth in Christ by being people who resist that hardness, who “eagerly stand on tip-toe for a better view of what tomorrow brings”.

... expecting that God will form Christ among us!

... asking one another, “Where is God leading your life in Christ?”

2. A second type of heart is that of ROCKY SOIL.

The word of Jesus catches our attention: We see Him in the light of another person’s life. We see Him in the fruit of another church’s ministry. We see Him in the reading of Scripture, in the attending of a conference ... and we’re interested.

= “Yea, that’s what I want!”

(i) But note what Jesus says about the seed in this soil – *It’s received with joy (springs up quickly), but doesn’t last – because when trouble or persecution comes, it quickly falls away. It has no roots.*

A. In other words, when Trouble & PAIN is involved, the new life FADES AWAY!

I.e. It's like the person who gets a vision of a SLIMMER SELF – but then realizes that that's going to take exercise & dieting! ... no thanks.

(ii) Biblically it reminds me of Peter when, after he figured out who Jesus is: *You are the Christ, the Son of Living God.*”, then Jesus begins to tell him about the way of the Cross – that there's PAIN in following me. Great blessings too, yes – but PAIN that you'll need to embrace.

Peter didn't like that message. He didn't want any pain in being a follower of Jesus. He didn't want to deny himself. Jesus had to rebuke Him severely!

He yet had a SELF-CENTERED heart.

= Jesus for him, not him for Jesus.

(iii) To encourage growth in Christ, we want to become a church that encourages one another to do HARD THINGS for God.

A. I.e. – Going on mission to the DR – that wasn't too hard. God led & blessed that assignment & there's more to be done – but it wasn't too hard a task. Going to Harvey on a regular basis ... Roseland – harder.

B. – Combining ministries with a CRC church – not too hard. But with an African-American congregation? = not easy! Uniting with Christians from a different denomination, race. That's hard. That's good – potential growth is in this.

C. Becoming a praying church together – that's hard – prayer is the hardest work of the church. Let's encourage one another in it.

DO HARD THINGS FOR GOD – growth comes from that!

3. The 3rd type of soil is THORNY. I call it a DISTRACTED HEART.

= there's just too many other things going to really let Jesus sink deeply within.

Verse 19 – *The worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth, the desire for other things ... chokes the Word!*

(i) I feel this even in my own personal reading of Scripture. I sit down with the Word to really draw Jesus from it.

And there's the Internet & there's the paper & there's the plans for the day, the projects to get done, the people I need to contact

- In our wealthy, busy society, this soil, generally speaking, well describes our hearts.

(ii) We need SACRED SPACE so we can grow in Christ - quietness ... and simplicity ... and Sabbath.

We're so distracted. It's hard to hear Christ in the context of all the other voices in the room of our heart. His voice comes, but then gets drowned out by all the others.

A. In his book on prayer, Henri Nouwen writes about INNER SILENCE: *"To be calm & quiet means being fully awake and following with close attention every move going on inside of you. Such silence requires the discipline to recognize the urge to get up and go again as a temptation to look elsewhere for what is close at hand – the Word of Jesus.*

Such silence offers the freedom to stroll in your own inner yard, and to rake up the leaves there and clear the paths so you can find the way to your own heart – and God's work in it."

= Tending the soil of the heart is cultivating inner silence in a wealthy, anxious, consumer society. We need to encourage it for our growth in Christ.

V. CONCLUSION

1. The last principle comes from the THIRD PARABLE.

It is a VISION for WHO WE BECOME as we grow in Christ: A PEOPLE THAT SHELTER OTHERS.

(i) The tiny mustard seed – the kingdom in our life / church / world – grows to become the largest of all garden plants in which the birds of the air can perch in its shade.

2. The image reminds me of a BIRD SANCTUARY at Pt. Pelee in Ontario, a natural habitat. Point Pelee is a large spate of sand on the north-shore of Lake Erie that cuts a few miles into the Lake. It's a bird watchers' paradise – for the trees there are filled with birds. They rest in their shade because that point is the first piece of land the tired birds come to when they migrate across that Great Lake.

They've flown for about 30 miles straight – across water – then they see land & trees ... and they're ready for a REST.

(i) That's the world we live in. People are tired, beating their wings & flying about, wondering if there is any rest in life.

God's design is for you / for us to be one of those trees at Pt. Pelee – ready to welcome & shelter, give rest & blessing to the weary birds of our world.

3. We become such people by continuing to grow in Christ:

- TRUSTING GOD FOR THAT GROWTH – He promises it!

- RECEIVING THE WORD OF CHRIST – through Scripture & the other means whereby God speaks to us.

- TENDING THE SOIL OF THE HEART – being willing to change & do hard things for God; refusing to be distracted by the temptations of the world.

CHRIST is the hope of the world

- Not Peace Church, not you or me.

- So we want Christ to grow in us – so that others may find Him through our life.

AMEN!