

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B  
June 17, 2018  
Proper 6

### Growth and Evangelism

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
be always acceptable to you, O LORD, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.*

This sermon is about **growth** and **evangelism**. That I should be preaching about these topics is as much of a surprise to me, as to you, believe me. After pondering today's readings, I was OK with talking about growth. But evangelism? I want you to know that I'm a cradle Episcopalian from good mid-Western stock. We didn't talk about sex, religion, or politics in my family, or anything else that might turn a conversation into an unpleasant experience. Besides, Kate just covered evangelism in a sermon a couple of months ago, and that's her **job** anyway. But those pesky themes kept returning to me.

I must confess that I didn't even recall the parable in Mark of the Secretly-Growing Seed. The parable of the Mustard Seed appears in all three synoptic gospels (that's Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and is much more famous. I delved a little into information about Mark's gospel. As most of you may know, it's the shortest of the four gospels. It is anonymous and thought to be the first gospel written. A favorite word in this gospel is "immediately." It appears approximately 40 times in Mark's 16 chapters. Jesus is depicted as being almost constantly active, running here and there to spread his message. This may well be because he knew that he only had three years to accomplish all that was set before him. However, Mark contains fewer of Jesus' actual words than any other gospel. There is one major discourse in Chapter 13, but other than that, it offers just a few parables. So I figure that the parables it contains must have seemed very important to this anonymous writer.

In the Parable of the Secretly-Growing Seed, Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a farmer scattering his seed upon the ground, allowing it to grow, and then harvesting it. It speaks of how this miracle of growth is something the farmer does not really understand, but he knows that once the grain is ripe, he has to harvest it. Do you see them? There are my themes: growth (that is, the seed growing into full grain) and evangelism (or, the harvest).

During the recent "Great 50 Days" that span Easter to Pentecost in the church calendar, I followed a calendar of reading that took me through the book of Acts – the story of the growth of the early church, right after Jesus' ascension. I came away with an even greater appreciation for the miracle **beyond** the resurrection, which was the growth of the early church. Most of these people really didn't get what Jesus was trying to tell them. In today's gospel, it even says that Jesus did not take the time to explain his parables to the crowds. Remember? – he was too busy squeezing everything into his schedule "immediately." And even when he did take the time to explain things to his disciples, they still didn't get it. When Jesus was arrested and crucified, they were terrified. They scattered and went into hiding. Peter denied him. Thomas doubted his peers' account of the resurrection. Yet somehow, out of this time of confusion and fear, **people connected**. Jesus returned and gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit to empower them and to remind them that He was always with them. The fact that the church grew and

spread as it did over the next 2,000 years is indeed a miracle, when you consider how people must have felt immediately after the crucifixion. But amazingly, they pulled together and spread the good news throughout a huge territory.

The miracle of growth that comes from a seed is something that I can relate to a little bit. I am fortunate enough to co-own a piece of land in Grant County, Kansas, in the state's southwest corner with my cousins. We have a Mennonite tenant farmer who owns two-thirds, and the descendants of our grandfather split the other third. It's a small investment, but there is something special about driving out there and seeing hard winter wheat as far as the eye can see. I even have a wooden block designed and made by one of my cousins that holds some of the pieces of the very wheat that we own together. It is a special reminder to me of growth, land, and family connections, especially since I don't get to Kansas very often. Our land is not irrigated, and my cousin John called about a month ago to tell me that because the draught in that part of the state is so bad, our farmer, Darvin, was considering plowing the wheat under and replanting with a spring crop, milo, in the hopes of salvaging something out of the land. In the 18 years since my father's death, we have never had to resort to this drastic of a measure. Darvin has since decided to **not** plow the wheat under, and we're hoping for some measure of harvest. But nature can be harsh, and it's a reminder that seeds need some form of nourishment to grow.

So, back to the growth of God's kingdom. How can we have something this good and yet (for many of us) be so uncomfortable and hesitant to share it? We are the farmers who are called to nourish the seeds. When I spoke at one of the Wednesday evening services during Lent, I talked a little about the two women with whom I work in a special education classroom. Neither is Christian. We have become a close team, but it wasn't always so, and when I was still fairly new and mentioned something about my church, they just **shut down**. My team and I can laugh together about that now, but they admit that they weren't initially thrilled at having a "church lady" in their midst. In general, we have similar political leanings and values, yet even though I can comfortably talk to them about my involvement in my church, I hesitate to explain to them the **reason** I am in a faith community - that I can have a personal relationship with the very essence of Love - a God who, to paraphrase today's psalmist,

- answers me in the day of trouble,
- protects me,
- sends me help from this very sanctuary at St. John's,
- supports me,
- remembers me,
- grants me my heart's desire when my heart is in the right place,
- and fulfills my plans, though maybe not quite always the way I think He will.

Who would want to walk away from that? And remember – we're talking about seeds. Maybe we don't have to go to the mount and deliver a proclamation. Maybe we could **share** that in trying times, good times, peaceful times and tense times, we have found a way that works for us and that we sincerely believe would truly work for anyone.

The hymn we sang at the beginning of today's service was one that I requested – Hymn 204, "Now the green blade riseth." I feel that it ties in with what we're talking about here. I'd like

you all to take out your hymnals and turn to that hymn. A few of us are going to read the hymn out loud **to you**. As you **listen**, think of these words as a psalm:

**(Layne)**

Now the green blade riseth from the buried grain,  
Wheat that in dark earth many days has lain;  
Love lives again, that with the dead has been:  
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.

**(Kate)**

In the grave they laid him, Love whom hate had slain,  
Thinking that never he would wake again,  
Laid in the earth like grain that sleeps unseen:  
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.

**(LEM)**

Forth he came at Easter, like the risen grain,  
He that for three days in the grave had lain,  
Quick from the dead my risen Lord is seen:  
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.

**And now, let's read the final verse together:**

When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain,  
Thy touch can call us back to life again,  
Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:  
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.

The green blade rose from darkness and death. With frequent reminders in the news of suicides, school shootings, and rampant homelessness, there seems to be plenty of darkness and death surrounding us. But Jesus is the Love that lives again. He comes back to touch the fields of our hearts that have been dead and bare. There are so many that need to know this...that need to hear it. We don't need to rend our clothing or point fingers or come on like a ton of bricks. But we cannot be so shy about sharing a message that feeds and nourishes souls and brings them to life again. As Paul said in today's passage from II Corinthians, "...if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation (like that blade of wheat that sprouts up from the seed).

So be bold. Be brave. Be willing to say one small thing. We have a wonderful truth to share. Give a little **nourishment** to a seed. It may just **grow** to become part of this **miracle** that is God's family.