

**The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – June 13, 2021 – Qualifying the Kingdom  
Psalm 20:1-9 and Mark 4:26-34**

Children love to be affirmed, and to be told that they are growing up. We know that they take pride in every reminder that they will one day serve as leaders. And that they look expectantly toward a future time when their ideas will be considered authoritative. While these tendencies are far more evident in childhood, this enduring part of our nature continues well into adulthood. We see it in our longing for greater responsibility, in our pursuit of identifiable goals, and in our quest to resolve the many problems around us. This is the rewarding and challenging work of maturation.

So it is curious, then, in our second lesson this morning, that Jesus does not simply affirm a glorious future made possible by the vision, and the work ethic, and the personal accomplishments of human minds and hands. Instead, Mark's Jesus insists that the kingdom will flourish, not in keeping with signs of our brilliance and determination, but on its own accord. And we soon learn that God's plan will emerge, not as we had devised or intended, but in God's time, and in God's way, and in accordance with God's will. The defining question for us, then, is not "Look

what we are doing – isn't that great?" It is, "What does God seem to be growing, and how can we help?"<sup>1</sup>

Jesus explains it this way. "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." Building on this concept, Ched Myers observes "the growth of the kingdom will be neither obvious nor controllable."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, "the vocation of the disciple," then as it is now, "lies not in trying to provoke the harvest (for that happens 'of itself'), but in tending to the 'sowing.'"<sup>3</sup> What an incredible challenge this is.

My wife currently serves on the Memorial Garden Committee here at Westminster. Yesterday, under clearer skies, that committee was hard at work spreading mulch in an effort to beautify our committal grounds, to retain moisture for the various plantings that reside there, and to prevent the spread of weeds. Nathan and I were on the opposite side of the building, where my son was enjoying a game of solo soccer while I thumbed through commentaries in search of wisdom for today's sermon.

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<sup>1</sup> David Schlafer, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 3*. Ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 88.

<sup>2</sup> Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, (Orbis Books, 1991), 179.

<sup>3</sup> Myers, 179.

In the midst of my reading and note taking in the margins, a car pulled up in the back lot, and a woman exited who is not a member of our congregation. She told me that she had just been driving down Exchange Street when she saw Westminster's gardeners working out front. She was now looking for a place to park, and she asked me for directions in order that she might join our team and offer her assistance. "I really like to volunteer," she explained as we made our way through the church, "and I have helped here in the past with your free community meals."

Reflecting on an earlier time, David Schlafer writes, "When I was a small child, my father introduced me to vegetable gardening. Step by step we prepared the soil, lined out shallow furrows, positioned pea seeds, covered them over, and watered the ground. Early the next morning my father found me out in the garden scratching the ground, searching for edible peas."<sup>4</sup>

Schlafer continues, "the issue here is more than just 'be patient, things take time.' It is that the commonwealth of God into which we are called is not under our control."<sup>5</sup> Thus, "while experience, skill, practice, and understanding in such endeavors as gardening, parenting, healing, and soul mentoring are essential, there

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<sup>4</sup> Schlafer, 87.

<sup>5</sup> Schlafer, 88.

is only so much that a farmer, a teacher, physician, therapist, community builder, parent, spouse, friend, or preacher can do to produce growth.”<sup>6</sup> “Produce,” he adds, is really “a misnomer. All that any of these can do is help to prepare the possibilities for growth, to nurture and foster that growth as (or if) it happens.”<sup>7</sup> In fact, such efforts often appear to be more “hands off,” involving things like “granting, providing, and protecting the necessary growing space.”<sup>8</sup>

Friends, all of this serves as a reminder of how the Kingdom of God emerges. And I think that you get the point. It’s not on account of our good works, as meaningful and well-intentioned as those may be. It is, instead, the direct result of the grace of God – nothing more and nothing less. And so, Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a mustard bush. “Not a cedar of Lebanon, or a giant sequoia, but an invasive plant,” which would normally grow to between two and six feet in height and was “often regarded as a weed.”<sup>9</sup> What an odd metaphor to describe the Kingdom of God.

And yet, Jesus knew that we were in this for the long haul, and was preparing us to consider the kind of endurance that would be necessary for nurturing the slow

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<sup>6</sup> Schlafer, 87.

<sup>7</sup> Schlafer, 87.

<sup>8</sup> Schlafer, 87.

<sup>9</sup> Schlafer, 88.

growth of our testimony. In these instances, Jesus' words remind us that we need "not be discouraged or give up."<sup>10</sup> For even though his ministry "may not appear to be establishing the kingdom," it is, indeed, dwelling here among us.<sup>11</sup>

One of the great mysteries of our faith is how one who was born in a manger, who was abandoned by his own people, was betrayed by his own disciples, and suffered a state-sanctioned death could possibly be the Savior of the world. And yet, here we are, making claims that we cannot prove and yet somehow know to be true. That Christ has come, that Christ has died, and that Christ will come again. This is the ancient promise renewed in us, in this community of faith, and at this Table we share as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Help us, Lord, to be patient, to relinquish our desire for control, and to ask, "What does God seem to be growing, and how can we help?" In the name of the creating, redeeming, and sustaining God, Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> Gail O'Day, *The New Interpreter's Bible Volume VIII*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press, 1995), 578.

<sup>11</sup> O'Day, 577.