

Ministry Fair Sunday 2015 Sermon, Proper 6B

Mark 4:26-34

Jesus said, "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. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Moving outside our comfort zones is never easy. And yet that is exactly what all of us did last Sunday when we met after Eucharist to deal with matters of importance to the Body of Christ in this place.

We gathered at that meeting, as we do each week at Eucharist, as one Body, one community of faith, comprising members with differing gifts and backgrounds. Some who attended that meeting had belonged to Christ Church their whole lives; others have been attending for a few years or less, some (like myself) having come from different Christian traditions. Some at that meeting are financially secure, while others struggle to pay their bills and put food on the table. Some like contemporary music, others like more traditional music, still others prefer no music at all. Some prefer Rite I, some Rite II, others would like to experiment with new rites altogether. Different vocational, family, and regional backgrounds mean that people at that meeting looked at things from different perspectives, holding different visions or priorities for our life together. Young families are concerned about formation of children and youth, while many older folk are concerned about visiting the sick and shut-in, how they might deepen their prayer life, or simply how they can make it to church. Some at that meeting have been giving so much of their time and energies to Christ Church for so many years that they are on the verge of burnout. Others are wondering how they might play more integral roles in the life of our parish and help it grow stronger.

I could not be more gratified with the manner in which this parish family stepped out of our comfort zone last week to prayerfully, thoughtfully, and respectfully

engage some of the challenges which we are facing as the Body of Christ in this place.

And Christ Church is certainly not alone in facing challenges in these times in which we live. Just this past week, the Southern Baptist Church, the largest Protestant denomination in the U.S., reported that they lost 200,000 members last year, their biggest decline since 1881. Christian churches in the West are currently going through a 500-year upheaval, the end result of which nobody is certain. But all the statistics these days about dwindling churches, about people who are “spiritual but not religious,” about how “I love Jesus but not the institutional church” have gotten overblown, I believe, and have missed some crucial, Biblical truths. In their book, *Why We Love the Church: In Praise of Institutions and Organized Religion*, authors Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck (who, by the way, are both in their 30’s) note that all the recent church-bashing has become formulaic and repetitive. “The narrative is becoming so commonplace,” they write, “you could Mad Lib it: ‘The institutional church is so (insert pejorative adjective). When I go to church I feel completely (negative emotion). The leadership is totally (adjective you would use to describe Richard Nixon) and the people are (noun that starts with un-). The services are (adjective you might use to describe going to the dentist), the music is (adjective you would use to describe the singing on Barney), and the whole congregation is (choose among: “passive,” “comatose,” “hypocritical” ...). The whole thing makes me (insert medical term).”

In their common-sense observations, these two 30-something authors provide a much-needed balance to all the literature over the past 15 years bad-mouthing the church. “Christ *loves* the church, gave Himself up for her...” Kluck and DeYoung write. “... [Christ and His Church] are one... They are inseparable as husband and wife. And any husband worth the paper his marriage license is printed on will be jealous to guard the good name of his wife. She may be a... poor excuse for a wife, but if she's your wife, you'll protect her honor... And woe to the friend who comes around your house, hangs out, and expects to have a good time, all the while getting digs in on your bride. Who wants a friend who rolls his eyes and sighs every time your wife walks into the room?

“Apparently, some people imagine **Jesus** wants friends like that. They roll their eyes and sigh over the church [which is the bride of Christ that Christ loves and gave his life for].” DeYoung and Kluck continue:

“The Bible also tells us that the church is the **body** of Christ, with Jesus Himself at its head (Eph. 1:22-23). Every **body** needs a head to rule over it... Likewise, every head needs a body... most of us don't see too many heads bobbing along apart from their bodies.

“Increasingly, [however,] we hear glowing talk of a churchless Christianity... These days, spirituality is hot; religion is not. Community is hip, but the church is lame...

“If Decapitation... means to cut off the head, then it stands to reason that Decorpulation... should refer to cutting off the body... There is a growing movement among self-proclaimed evangelicals and in the broader culture to get spirituality without religion, to find a relationship without rules, and have God without the church. More and more, people are looking for a decorpulated Christianity...

“The church we love is as flawed and messed up as we are, but she's Christ's bride nonetheless. And I might as well have a basement without a house or a head without a body as despise the wife my Savior loves.” Powerful words from a pastor and a lay person in their 30's. And at our Faith-Seeking Journey retreat a few Saturdays ago, we read similar words from a **very different** source: Benedictine monk and Zen practitioner David Steindl-Rast. In his article “The Mystical Core of Organized Religion,” Brother David writes, “We need religious institutions. If they weren't there, we would create them. Life creates structures...

“The question we need to tackle is this: How does one get from mystic experience to an established religion? My one-word answer is: inevitably. What makes the process inevitable is that we do with our mystical experience what we do with every experience, that is, we try to understand it; we opt for or against it; we express our feelings with regard to it. Do this with your mystical experience and you have all the makings of a religion.” In some ways, Steindl-Rast and DeYoung and Kluck could not be more different; yet they all see the institutional church as not only essential, but a gift of God.

Now we must face the reality that the number of Americans who identify as Christians is declining steadily, and we at Christ Church (like all churches today) face some very real challenges. But at the same time let us remember that Jesus said to Simon Peter, “you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18) We know that the Church, like Peter himself, is anything but perfect, and yet Jesus promised that the gates of Hell will not prevail against the church, his beloved bride, his body over which he is head. Just as the seed in today's Gospel parable grows of its own, we know not how, with a God-imbued life-force of its own, so the Church is an organism with a God-imbued life-force of **its** own: the indwelling Holy Spirit – the gift of which, at Pentecost, was the “birthday of the Church”. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “Christian community is not an **ideal** that *we* must realize, but rather a **reality** created by God in Christ in which *we* may participate.” That bears repeating: Christian community – the Church – is not an **ideal** that *we* must realize, but rather a **reality** created by God in Christ in which *we* may participate. The **Holy Spirit** created the Church; not us. And what an incredible honor and

blessing to be able to participate in the life of that Church which the Holy Spirit birthed and *still* indwells and empowers!

And so we celebrate today the fact that we are each called to play our part in that Living Body of Christ which is His Church. Now, just as no individual is the same, so no local church is the same. Each church has its own unique gifts to offer, according to the time, talents, treasure, characteristics, passions, and willingness of its members. But while individuals differ in eye and hair color, blood type, height, and personality, *all* of us must have hearts, lungs, kidneys, and livers in order to survive. And while churches may likewise differ from one another, they also must have some **essential** parts. If children and youth are to be formed by the Church in the Christian faith, we must have Sunday School teachers and youth group leaders; if we are to have clean chalices to take Communion from, ironed hangings in seasonal colors, and flowers on our altar for each Eucharist, we must have Altar Guild members; if we are to show the love and hospitality of Christ to families who have just lost a loved one, we must have funeral reception workers; if we are to have good stewardship of our funds, we must have a Parish Treasurer; if we are to grow in numbers, people must be willing to share the good news of Christ as it is expressed through Christ Church with others, and extend the invitation to participate in our community of faith.

Currently, we have needs in **all** these essential parts of the Body. A leader of our Altar Guild recently came to me and told me of our great need for new Altar Guild members. Only two members are below the age of 70, three are in their 80's (and two of **those** have been incapacitated for some time). Having one church service on Sundays instead of two will help reduce the work load, but our Altar Guild still needs new members, especially when we have a few funerals in a row, like we had recently. Jennifer has graciously offered to teach Sunday School next year in addition to supervising the nursery, but she will be doing this while being mom to her own three children and surrogate mom to her three nieces. **She** could use some help. One of the items identified by some of you as a need at last week's parish meeting was reviving the Youth Group. I am more than willing to work with someone else to accomplish this, but I cannot do it on my own. Our Youth Groups in the past have blessed so many people – as far away as Juarez, Mexico! Having celebrations like today's Ministry Fair requires setting up and arranging a "glorified coffee hour," which requires the work of a dwindling and overworked Hospitality Committee. *They* could use more members. Dustin has volunteered a way to connect with children in our community by having a meal and games or movies once or twice a month, as he did yesterday. We all would love to have more children among us, so giving Dustin a hand by providing some food or an activity from time to time would be a great help. Similarly, we have, for years, looked for ways to better tie into our community, and we are going in the right direction with Asset-Based Community Development; this, too, will require meals and some organizing.

So I encourage you today to prayerfully consider where God might be calling you to minister in the life of our parish family. It may be an area you feel competent in, or it may be an area you know nothing about. It is said that “God doesn’t call the qualified; He qualifies the called.” Training is available; don’t be afraid to step out of your comfort zone! Take some time at the Ministry Fair following this service to ask questions about various existing ministries – or offer new ministries of your own! Please ask me if you have any questions at all, and if I can’t answer the question, I will direct you to someone who probably can. Then please fill out the Time and Talent pledge form which you were given and either give it to me today at the Ministry Fair or send it into the office. Don’t be rushed; be thoughtful and prayerful.

God has used this faith community, Christ Church, to make a positive difference in many, many lives for well over 100 years, sharing the life and love of Christ with each other and spreading it out into the world. As Bonhoeffer wrote, the Church is a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. And it is our privilege, our blessing, and our calling to do so with all our hearts in this wonderful community of faith.

AMEN