

The Kingdom of God Is Growing Among Us

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12

Luke 17:5-6, 11-21

October 31, 2010

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Reformation - 122 SHPC Anniversary – Stewardship Dedication Sunday

It is hard to sense the power of the ordinary. While that is where we spend most of our time, we live for the extraordinary moment, the World Series, the Super Bowl, the Iron Bowl, Halloween, a week at the beach, turkey season, and deer season. But most of the time we live in the ordinary, routine meetings and commitments, work, school, recreation, raking leaves, paying bills, fixing gutters. It is here, within these ordinary moments that God most frequently shows himself in little, quiet, but transformative ways.

Who was not thrilled with the unfolding story a few weeks ago that culminated in the rescue of those 33 Chilean miners from their 10 week captivity down in the San Jose Mine 2000 feet below the earth - trapped for 70 days, for the first 17 days given up for dead. They came up one by one in the narrow bullet tube specially constructed to transport them up the narrow two foot wide winding curving tunnel burrowed through solid rock. It seemed a miracle. 33 men resurrected from darkness to light, from certain death to a second chance at life. It buoyed spirits round the world to see them as they emerged, each greeted by their tenacious Chilean President, Sebastian Pinera, who had tirelessly worked to marshal international efforts and bring about their Herculean rescue. Something many said could not be done.

That is the sort of extraordinary day and miraculous effort I am talking about. We look for that. We long for that. We need that. A special day like this, Reformation Sunday, South Highland Presbyterian Church's 122 birthday, and this Stewardship Commitment Sunday. A day to sing the great hymns and celebrate our great heritage, look back with deep gratitude and look ahead with great hope. But that great day in Chile of the miner's rescue came only after 70 days of methodical preparation and over 70 days of life sustaining patterns below their model homes and their ordinary days – yet forever changed.

The Gospel of Luke is especially intent on our seeing God at work in the ordinary. Silently, slowly, God is at work, like seed gestating down in dark rich earth. In this 17th chapter Luke sets out three diverse scenes where Jesus addresses three different groups who together show us God at work in ordinary events in such a way that there really is nothing ordinary about them. God's Kingdom is unfolding all around us if we have eyes to see, ears to hear, minds to grasp, hearts to love and wills to respond with joyful thanks.

First Jesus is conversing with his inner group of disciples. They ask for more faith, and Jesus says, if you will exercise the faith you already have, even if it is tiny as a mustard seed, you can move a great tree from here to there. Second he encounters a band

of 10 lepers along the border between Israel and Samaria, diseased outcasts, who stand at a distance and plead for Jesus to have mercy. He does, and tells them to go to the priests, for authentication, and as they go they are healed. Of those 10, one, a Samaritan outsider returns to Jesus to offer his thanks, kneeling at his feet. All are healed. One is saved. Third Jesus is encountered by Jewish Pharisees, keepers of the Law, who question him, when is the Kingdom of God coming?

Jesus warns, Do not to search for such signs because in fact the Kingdom of God is among you. He is literally that presence of God's Kingdom, walking and talking, teaching, healing there among them, and making his way to final claiming of his Kingship and Kingdom through his sacrifice in Jerusalem. The Kingdom's final coming will one day become visible, he says, as lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other. You will know it when it comes. But first the Son of Man must endure much suffering and be rejected by his own generation.¹ Meanwhile just look around, the Kingdom is unfolding around you. Can you see it? Can you sense it? Will you enter into it?

On this special day I want to lift up a number of those quiet unexpected ways God's Kingdom is unfolding around us as we enter that Kingdom and exercise the faith God has given us. I want to encourage each of us to trust that God is at work, growing his Kingdom right here, right now, and enter into its present reality, ordinary day after ordinary day.

I

To do so - Recognize first that the seed has been planted. God is at work. The disciples are feeling inadequate. Immense challenges are all around. So many needs, a hostile culture with a massive indifferent Empire ruled from Rome, and a resistant religious institution that even God himself seems unable to move. So they plead for more faith, and Jesus says use what you've got. Use that tiny mustard seed of faith already at work.

Mustard was thought to be the tiniest of all seeds. Yet Jesus says, if you will put it to work you will observe the most amazing transformation, a great tree will grow. The Protestant Reformation that brought renewal and rebirth to a stale church discovered this. At its heart the Reformation was recovery of the seed of the Good News of God's grace alone through faith alone, revealed in the Bible. God's grace freely given, freely received by our response of faith, that and that alone is how we are made right with God, and then with those around us. The power of this tiny mustard seed planted and at work. Only in the Bible do we learn that we are made right with God by grace through faith. The Reformation was a mighty occasion for hearing afresh this message that lay dormant over centuries of institutional stagnation.

When I worked in Washington, D.C. in 1977 and 1978 for an Arkansas Senator the year after I graduated from college, I joined the National Presbyterian Church. This is a great historic congregation which in the post World War 2 years of the Eisenhower Administration, became a symbol of the presence and power of Christianity in tandem

with American cultural and political power. The General Assembly will give it special status as a national center of Presbyterian faith. This was Christendom's highest moment in American history. Everyone went to church. Dwight Eisenhower was baptized as a sitting President and became a member at National. President Ronald Reagan attended there. In the 1950's and early 1960's being a Christian was virtually synonymous with being an American. Everybody went to church. In January of 1978, the day after Congress reconvened I took the Senator I worked for to the annual Congressional service of Holy Communion hosted by the National Presbyterian Church. Many Senators and Congressmen attended each year. Moderators of the varied Presbyterian and Reformed churches in America officiated. I remember seeing John Glenn, astronaut, Senator and Presbyterian elder there. Years before, I am told the entire Congress, Congressional Staff and the President himself and his cabinet always attended. The nation's leaders were together in prayer in a Presbyterian Church. By 1978 the tradition was waning. It was not hard to find a seat.

Today the whole tradition is gone. They no longer have such a service at the National Presbyterian Church. Few members of Congress even know where the National Presbyterian Church is, though it is right across the street from the Chinese Embassy and next door to ABC News Washington Headquarters. You see, the Christian Church in this nation is no longer linked with the culture. Christendom is over. The Eisenhower Era when "under God" was added to the pledge, is gone. Christian witness has been gravely wounded sometimes by external challenges, sometimes by its own internal scandals and poor leadership. Since the 1960's there has been a massive separation of Church and State and, also more and more, of the virtues of Christianity itself, from the state and the culture, summarized by the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, virtues that, to some degree at least, used to osmose into the state and culture. Virtues that, when we departed from them, at least we had a moral compass to know that from which we were departing.

This is not the case any longer, even here in the Deep South. The culture is no longer Christian in this secular post-modern era. Hockey and soccer thrive on Sunday morning here. Some parts of the country are said to be actually truly pagan, an interesting observation on Halloween, which by the way is far more recognizable as the meaning of this day than the remembrance of the Reformation, or the fact that Halloween is the eve of a Christian Festival Day, All Souls Day.

All this means we have our work cut out for us. All this means that the followers of Jesus Christ must be all the more intentional about living out of our own seeds of faith. The Church cannot and will not be seen as an adjunct to a benevolent state and handmaiden to nice middle class values.

But that is not what Christianity is anyway. Jesus brought a way of life that was radically counter-cultural until the culture under Emperor Constantine co-opted it. Now, in this new and different de-coupled tithe we have to claim that little seed of faith we have, and live out our fullest possibilities. Jesus says, with this faith nothing will be impossible, and we will be empowered by God himself.

I sensed this power in many ways through my travels this summer through Bangladesh and India, where Christians are a tiny minority in Bangladesh. I was humbled and inspired by the witness of Dr. Les Morgan, Presbyterian Church USA medical missionary, and a close friend of our own Cody and Talulah Watson. Dr. Morgan and his wife came to Bangladesh 20 years ago, right out of Medical School. Christians are a tiny speck of Bangladesh, only 6% of the population of that officially Islamic state. And Presbyterians are an even tinier speck of those few Christians in this the 6th largest nation in the world with a population of 150 million mostly Muslim people. Yet Dr. Les Morgan tirelessly continues planting seeds of faith there, year after year. Raising three children there was no easy matter. Then a year before our visit, they lost a child to cancer. Still they returned to Bangladesh after this child's death. Les told us he feels God has called him to represent Jesus Christ there. He told us, and I quote

“I have been through an evolution of why I am here as a missionary. You cannot always look at your output. You have to look at the building of your relationships. If I am able to go to a Muslim slum and help a family on behalf of my church, then there are ramifications.”ⁱⁱ

Tiny seeds planted.

II

Recognize first that seeds have been planted. Then second nurture those seeds in your daily lives. Having activated the little seeds of faith God has planted, if you will encourage that faith through watering it and fertilizing it, through personal spiritual practices, through participation in congregational life and mission, you will experience growth, even growth strong enough to move trees or mountains.

The audience shifts as Jesus is answering some Pharisees who ask him when the Kingdom of God will be coming. Then, as now, people have looked at all that is wrong in our society and our religious systems and tried to gage and predict when there would be a final reckoning. For the Pharisees it was a question of when the Messiah they anticipated will arrive. Jesus says, you need to readjust your expectations and refocus your vision. The Kingdom will finally come in God's own time, and when it does you will know it. But meanwhile the Kingdom is breaking out all around you, if you but have faith to sense and see it.

Looking around at our life together here at South Highland, I am amazed at how the Kingdom is springing forth among us. You are an incredible people, and you are, in so many ways, giving evidence of this Kingdom. There are the big dramatic visible stories, like the World Communion Sunday joint Communion celebration with the other congregations of the Five Points Area. Like last week's BBQ and Bluegrass Hospitality event we offered for the whole Southside Community as hundreds came to enjoy the food and the music and the friendship. Like the mission trips to Kenya with teams who have gone to put in water purification systems and share in worship and life with Kenyan Christians. While there, Jim Truesdell was even asked to officiate at a funeral - like homeless families housed here for a week through BHN - because you care. Like Dianne Davis departing from our circle drive, that her husband Neil designed, on Highland

Avenue two weeks ago to bike her way at the tender age of 70 down to Piedras Negras, Mexico, in celebration of the amazing building program, Constructores Para Cristo, Building for Christ, she founded 25 years ago that has built 675 homes that her husband Neil designed in that poor community. You may not realize it but South Highland, that Sunday, made national news on CNN as they carried this story, interviewed Dianne and showed her peddling out from here headed South by Southwest. CNN should have reported Jim Truesdell's installation too.

Those are some of the visible dramatic stories we hear about. But there are so many more we never hear about. People walk in off the street with a problem. They can't pay a power or water bill and Jeannie Burton meets with them and your Good Sam giving enables her to help. Quiet friendships within small groups, circles and classes; mentoring between children, youths and adults and one-on-one prayer partnerships many of you are involved in. William Sloane Coffin once said of the New York congregation where he was pastor, "I don't want Riverside to be an institution for those interested in things religious. I want it to irrigate the community with hope." I like that. South Highland wants us to irrigate the community with hope as we are "serving with the passion of Christ."

III

Recognize first that the seed has been planted. Then nurture that seed in your daily lives. Finally express your thanks. Always give thanks, and do so in tangible ways. Gratitude is our response to God for the faith he plants in us and enables us to plant and water in others. Our stewardship commitments we make today are one very important way we express our thanks. Learn from that single leper, the only one of the nine, and the one with two strikes against him since he was not only a leper suffering from the AIDS of his day and thus ostracized, but also a Samaritan, considered a heretic by the Jews who lived outside the borders. He alone receives the full healing salvation from Jesus because he alone recognizes the source of his healing and returns to do something about it. He comes and kneels before Jesus to give him thanks. He alone hears Jesus say, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

Leo Tolstoy was a strange individual, but a deeply spiritual follower of Jesus Christ. A famous author of classic novels like War and Peace, and Anna Karina, he also wrote a famous philosophical and theological book called The Kingdom of God Is Within You. This book had a profound impact on Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. in helping them develop their non-violent approaches to combating evil that, through Gandhi overturned British colonialism in India, and through King overturned racism in the United States. Tolstoy argued that the Christian seed of faith can dwell within a person and enable them, and enable him or her and societies to be changed. The teachings of the Sermon on the Mount, Tolstoy argued, are not simply unattainable ethical ideals but practical daily ways for living and ordering life. He wrote,

"All we can know is what we who make up mankind ought to do, and not to do, to bring about the coming of the kingdom of God. And that we all know. And we

need only each begin to do what we ought to do, we need only each live with all the light that is in us, to bring about at once the promised kingdom of God to which every man's heart is yearning."ⁱⁱⁱ

We could sense it on that day the miners emerged from the darkness beneath the earth in Chile, as they experienced a literal resurrection from seemingly certain death and a second chance at life. We can sense it in a moment of high celebration such as we observe today in this congregation. But may we sense it and seek it, and contribute to this Kingdom life that comes to us from our Lord Jesus Christ in each and every moment of each and every day. Doing so, nothing will be impossible! Your faith has made you well!

“To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Amen.

ⁱ Luke 17:24-25.

ⁱⁱ Dr. Les Morgan in conversation with our clergy group in Bangladesh at a dinner at the Papal Nunciature, in Dhaka, Bangladesh, 7-10-10.

ⁱⁱⁱ Leo Tolstoy Leo Tolstoy, The Kingdom of God Is within You, p.278.