

“Seedtime and Harvest”

Mark 4.26–34

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 18 June 2006

Well, it's new members' Sunday again. It's a joyful time as we welcome new companions on the journey of faith that we travel together here at Plymouth. So, again, *welcome!* As Sharon and I were teaching the new members class last week, I read aloud the covenant that each of us has entered when we joined Plymouth. Sometimes, it may feel as if the UCC is a denomination that requires little of its members. We don't tell you that you cannot drink, dance, play cards, or smoke. We don't check your 1040 to see if you're tithing. We don't demand that you be straight or white or middle-class. We don't tell you what you have to believe. Not only do you not have to agree with everything Sharon and I say from the pulpit, our constitution says, “Members shall have the undisturbed right to follow the word of God according to the dictates of their own conscience, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.” It all sounds pretty low-commitment, right?

Not so. As I was reading the covenant to our new members' class, I reiterated one sentence that really stuck out. It wasn't “I promise, so far as I am able, to attend the services of this church, observe its sacraments, support its benevolences and endeavor to make it a fruitful body of Christian people,” which in itself is a pretty tall order. “I give myself *unreservedly* to God's service and take this to be my church.” Unreservedly. That's strong language. That's bold language. That's high-commitment language. And it's something we each have agreed to give. The apostle Paul makes this request of the church in Rome: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present yourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”¹ So, it isn't about bringing a few doves or even a lamb to be slaughtered to please God, but rather as members of the Body of Christ we “give ourselves unreservedly to God's service” ... or at least we try!



So as we become members of a church, it's a seedtime. We're planting the seeds of the kingdom of God. Each time we baptize someone – an infant, a child, or an adult – we are planting the seeds of the kingdom of God. Each time we perform an act of love or service in Christ's name, we are planting the seeds of the kingdom of God. In fact, we *become* the seeds of the kingdom.

The seeds can be tiny, like the mustard seed. These seeds are not much bigger than the head of a pin, and yet they grow wildly into a good-sized shrub. It also grows like mint. ...once it takes hold, it dominates the landscape. If you're trying to scrape out a living in Judea, you don't want this noxious weed anywhere near your fields.

So, why does Jesus use an undesirable plant as an analogy for the kingdom of God? After all, the Temple authorities and the Roman Empire were keeping the rows of the Judean garden in very good shape: plenty of order, eradication of undesirable weeds, and a harvest of wealth on the backs of agricultural laborers who had no property. Why a mustard seed?

Here's another way to look at it: The kingdom of God is like a stubborn weed in the midst of a lush, green lawn that looks like a putting green, a weed that you can never fully eradicate. You can cut it back; you can put herbicide on it; you can get *almost* all the root, but it keeps coming back, and eventually it will take over. It may be 20 years from now or

¹ Romans 12.1

2,000 years from now, but eventually it will overcome the carefully manicured grass. Why an invincible weed?



The words of our Plymouth mission statement read: “It is our mission to worship God and help make *God’s realm [or kingdom]* visible in the lives of people, individually and collectively, especially as it is set forth in the life, teachings, death and living presence of Jesus Christ.”

What is the thing we pray for – twice! – each time we say the Lord’s Prayer? At the end of the prayer, we conclude “for thine is *the kingdom*, the power, and the glory forever.” But in the center of the prayer, we ask that “thy *kingdom* come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Have you ever noticed that we have a very strange pause the way we offer that prayer? “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done [pause] on earth as it is in heaven.” It makes a greater separation between the kingdom and earth. But if we pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth [pause] as it is in heaven” it takes on different shades of meaning. (Ancient Greek had no punctuation marks, so we don’t have a lot of guidance on where to put the comma and pause.) If we pause as I did in the second reading, heaven and earth are not so very far apart, nor are they when we live out the kingdom here and now.

The kingdom of God is less concerned about getting you into heaven than creating a better existence where we can work to be cocreators of a different realm, not with Caesar, not with Herod, nor with our current Caesars or Herods, but rather with God.

In many ways, our mission statement reflects the Social Gospel movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It was the dominant movement in American Protestantism, and it was against this engaged theology that Fundamentalism began. The two key underpinnings of the movement were (if you will forgive the male metaphors...it is Father’s Day after all) “the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man” or to use more inclusive language, “God as the parent in charge and all persons as children of God’s family.” (Okay, it lacks the ring of “the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man,” but you get the idea.) The name of that family is the kingdom of God.

“The Kingdom of God is humanity organized according to the will of God,” writes Walter Rauschenbusch, the most influential theologian of the Social Gospel. “The kingdom of God,” he wrote in 1907, “is a collective conception involving the whole social life of man. It is not a matter of saving human atoms, but of saving the social organism. It is not a matter of getting individuals to heaven, but of transforming life on earth into the harmony of heaven.”² The Social Gospel focused on the kingdom here and now, and I cannot help but think that the DNA of the Social Gospel movement is alive and well in the UCC today.



If you are Caesar or Herod – the government or their religious establishment toadies – do you want the kingdom of God to succeed? After all, this is subversive stuff...if it is God’s kingdom (and not Caesar’s) and if Christ is the head of the church (not Henry VIII or the Pope) it tends to upset the applecart.

So, perhaps you who have joined Plymouth today (and promised your unreserved service to God) have just committed high treason in pledging your allegiance to the kingdom of God.

As each of us goes forward, let us recommit ourselves to being servants of God and citizens of the kingdom. Let’s attempt to nurture the growth of those mustard seeds and weeds in the lawn as we attempt to make God’s realm visible to all people. Amen.

² Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. (NY: Macmillan, 1907), p. 65.