

Jon Hauerwas – July 15, 2018 – “In Parables”
2 Corinthians 5:6-9 and 14-17 and Mark 4:26-34

Earlier this week, my oldest son was riding in the backseat of my car when he asked me what the word “scorched” means. It means “burned up,” I told him. “Eesh,” he said, wincing. “Where did you hear about the word scorched?” I asked him. “Vacation Bible School,” he responded. “Oh, yeah?” I continued. “Was that word in one of the parables?” “Yes,” he said, “the one with the seeds.” “Oh, the parable of the sower,” I said, as I went onto describe it. “You know, the one where some seed was sown on thorny ground where it grew up and was choked. Some was sown on rocky ground where it could not root very well. The sun came up and scorched it and it withered away. And some was sown on good soil, where it produced a great yield?” “Yes, yes, that’s the one,” he said with a tone of understanding and recognition.

Jesus often spoke in parables. These are short stories which highlight common, everyday situations and objects as a means for communicating far more significant points about who God is and who we are in relationship to the divine. That these lessons are brief is a good reminder to anyone who might assume that the length of the missive is directly related to the importance of the lesson. Just take, for example, the Gettysburg Address. In one of the most famous proclamations in American history, Abraham Lincoln spoke for less than three minutes and employed

all of 10 sentences. Today, School children study it, and may even commit it to memory in whole or in part. Such is the lasting impact of a few strokes of genius.

Well, now that Vacation Bible School 2018 has come to an end, I wanted to highlight one of the parables that our children studied this week. In the parable of the mustard seed, we heard that something significant can emerge from even the tiniest of seeds. If planted in good soil and nurtured intentionally, a great shrub will one day form, providing shade and shelter to a variety of creatures. Such it is, we hear, with the Kingdom of God.

The claim here is that ministry typically begins with something that is seemingly insignificant. And if that's the case, then I can't help but think of our youth ministry at Westminster. Just a few years ago, our youth programming in this place had all but disappeared. Limping along, we employed the services of a consulting firm called Ministry Architects. Soon, new leaders were cultivated. New processes were put in place. New programs were established. The growth has been slow. And yet, it is happening. Our youth recently embarked on a mission trip to serve others. The seeds are being sown.

Or consider our children's ministry. Already strong in many ways, it was given additional support by the same firm. This past week, 53 children participated in Vacation Bible School. The growth has been steady and inspiring. Children from the neighborhood and from other congregations are joining us. The seeds are being sown.

Or consider our financial situation. After deficit budgets from 2012 – 2016, we enjoyed our first budget surplus in 2017. And again this year, our financial picture is impressive. Friends, the seeds are being sown.

In many areas of life, rapid progress both looks and feels exciting. But while dieters tout short-term weight loss, dieticians and physicians prefer to talk about long-lasting lifestyle changes. So it is in the church. We are all aware of churches that have attracted large numbers of people in a short amount of time. In these cases, such growth is often based on the charismatic abilities of a single individual. And then, when that person departs, whether it be to accept another call, or retire, or because some scandal has been made public, then a huge vacancy emerges, and the church is left in tatters. Just imagine the Cleveland Cavaliers next season.

Today, Westminster is in the midst of building excellent ministries that are far more focused on enduring processes than on the outsized spiritual gifts of magnetic personalities. The intention here is to improve the health of the entire system so that no one staff member or volunteer will dictate the future success and fruitfulness of this congregation. But, in order for the system to work, leaders must be willing to keep their egos in check, actively support and encourage the work of others, and fulfill the obligations that have been entrusted to them.

In 1996, when he was 25 years old, Mark Driscoll started a church in his home in Seattle called Mars Hill. Two decades later, the church boasted 15,000 members.

¹ Yet, he was ultimately fired from the church that he founded on account of his authoritarian tendencies, including verbal assaults, bullying, and shaming of church leaders. Driscoll once boasted that he would never be fired, claiming “I am the Mars Hill brand.” What I find so interesting about this is that I thought that Jesus was supposed to be our brand.

Friends, this is an important reminder that the church is not about us and our agendas. It’s not about out-sized personalities. And it’s not about catering to the whims of society. It’s about pursuing community that is sincere, and authentic, and

¹ <https://www.vox.com/2014/8/24/6050155/megachurch-pastor-mark-driscoll-was-an-evangelical-rock-star-heres>

real. It's about treating others with respect. It's about valuing the gifts that others bring. It's about working cooperatively.

Such an approach may never make the headlines. However, I can assure you that the Kingdom of God will grow. Slowly, steadily, purposefully. You know, when I was a child, I could not name a single parable for you. And now, my own son wants to talk about them with me on the way across town. The seeds are being sown. All thanks be to God. Amen.