Sunday, October 14, 1979
SECRET GROWTH
Mark 4:26-32

Do you get the feeling sometimes when you read the daily paper or hear or watch the news on radio or television that things in this world are going out of control? Here are some headlines from newspapers this past week. “Inflation is out of control.” “Federal Reserve Board Actions Guarantee Recession,” “Gunman Kills Policeman and Wounds Six Other People.” “Stock Market Drop is Largest since 1974” “Good Giants Violating Anti-Inflation Guidelines.” “Riot Police Clear the Way for Non-Union Employees.” “Interest Rates up to 12% in Lincoln.” “Serious Crime on Rise.” “New Gasoline Shortage Predicated.” “No Gasoline Shortage Predicted.” These are just a few of the headlines from this past week.

Sometimes we can’t help but feel that things are going out of control. AT the same time, part of the reason we feel that most things are out of control is because we also feel that we should be able to control most things and because we want to control most things. And these are a lot of things we can do. We can produce some rain artificially. We can change the course of rivers. We believe that if we can only change the social conditions, then we can change human beings and make people into something different.

Perhaps because we have been attempting to control more and more of the creation and have had some success, we get more nervous when things seem out of control, or when we can’t manage everything. It becomes a spiritual problem because we forget that we can never control everything to our satisfaction and even worse we forget how to rely on the fact that it is God who clothes the lilies of the field and feeds the birds of the air, and that God’s Kingdom comes no matter what happens.

It’s a spiritual problem because in our desire for more and more control, God on whom we used to depend has receded more and more into the background. Thus, when things seem out of control, we have the feeling that we stand utterly alone and that nobody is really in charge anymore.

So, we are both overactive and nervous. We believe that things are out of control, and yet we believe we ought to be able to control events and people. One person said to me, “I don’t know anymore whether to drink or to pray.”

On the one hand, we believe that our world, like the Titanic, is unsinkable and our navigation perfect and yet, on the other hand, we are very nervous about it all because deep down we know that our navigation is not perfect.

There was an old man I knew who had had lots of responsibility during his lifetime and yet knew the limits of what he could do. When he was asked what he was going to do in the quiet closing phase of his life after years of great activity and power, this answer was, “I want to see a tree grow.” This old man would not have been able to make such a statement were it not for the fact that during his earlier years of responsibility and activity, he never lost sight of the fact that ultimately, he and other members of the human race were ultimately not in control of creation. During his busy years therefore, he had always found time for quietness and contemplation, for being open to the presence of God, time for worship, and for remembering that God is ultimately in control.

He knew the truth of Psalm 90, “Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting, thou are God. Thou turnest us back to dust, and sayest, “Turn back, (slow down) all you people, for a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night.”

Maybe the reason why many of us who are aging become melancholy and cynical is because for years we have thought we were in control and were never able therefore to let go and let God, and now we can no longer see a tree growing and therefore are nothing but run-down merry-go-rounds.

It is to this condition that the two brief parables from the Gospel of Mark are speaking.

Here is a man who has sowed his fields. When he has done his job, he goes about his other work. He feeds the cattle, mends the fences, goes to town, takes his rest, and gets up again the next day to go about his work. This he does day after day and all the while the seed grows which he has planted, even though in the early stages of growth he cannot see that it is growing. He can only wait. After a time, a tiny blade peeks through the soil, then later the stalk and much later the grain appears. The growing goes on automatically. The second brief parable is similar. Jesus said that a tiny seed may be among the smallest things we can see, yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes a large shrub or tree and puts forth large branches.

The point of these two brief parables is not so much the gradualness of the growth of the seed as it is the sureness of the growth, its inevitability and the fact that the seed grows without any further effort from us.

How do these parables speak to our present-day situation?

1. Note first, that these are parables of comfort. That a comfort it is to know that in the midst of everything seeming out of control and in the midst of our failure to always be in control; in the midst of all our scheming and planning and good and bad speculations; in the midst of all of our activity and our failures, there is still another stream of events flowing silently and sometimes secretly on; that God is letting his seeds grow and God is achieving his ends.

To put it another way, the one fixed pole in all the bewildering confusion is the faithfulness and the dependability of God. Insane as we human beings may be with our idea that we can control everything, God’s faithfulness, God’s love and care continue and are always undergirding us.

The disciples in Jesus’ day must’ve thought the world to be as confusing and out of control as we do. Some of them were tempted to join the Zealots who wanted to hurry things up and force a swifter and surer method of establishing the kingdom. There is always the temptation toward the delusive short cuts of force and violence when things aren’t moving fast enough for us. Instead of that, Jesus in these parables reminds us of the sure forces of God which bring forth grain of themselves.

What tremendous pressure there was on Jesus to try to force him to hectic, nervous, explosive activity; to get on with it and set up his kingdom. But how utterly different was the actual life of Jesus Christ as we see it in the gospels. Though Rome occupied Palestine, and whole continents were in desperate need, Jesus still had time to stop and talk to the individual. He

associated with publicans, lonely widows, and despised prostitutes. He moved among the outcast of society. He appeared not to be bothered at all that these were not strategically important people, that they had no prominence, that they were not key figures, but only the unfortunate lost children of God. He could do this because all the time he had the confidence and comfort that God's seed was planted and growing.

2. Secondly, then these two parables remind us that God's Kingdom is always growing, even though we cannot always see it — some of the growth is secret.

"First the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear." Growth in secret, but also growth takes place in stages. Growth cannot skip from the tiny blade direct to the full grain, there's an intermediate stage. Irrational and impatient expectations do not help the growth. Many parents have harmed their children by pushing them too fast, by wanting them to skip over certain stages of growth, by trying to make them into little adults all at once.

Our impatience can harm growth in almost any area of life. We can trample on the little blade that first peeks out of the soil, or we can try to force its quick growth and ruin the plant in the process. Here is a principle that applies to all of life.

3. Thirdly, with these two parables Jesus is saying that although the Kingdom of God often seems tiny and insignificant on this earth when compared to the world powers — in his time the Roman empire, an din our time the power of the United States, or Russia, or China, or the OPEC oil nations, or whatever we want to compare the Kingdom of God with — The Kingdom of God is like a tiny seed that grows secretly and has within it power beyond our comprehension. Do not let the tiny see fool you because of its size. The tiny acorn becomes the giant oak.

It is almost impossible for us to realize just how tiny a seed Christianity was. Or to reverse the image, it was impossible for the disciples to visualize that their small band of followers whose leader was this wandering Rabbi who died on the cross, unrecognized in his own time as any kind of official teacher of religion, that this tiny see would one day grow as it has.

Al the powerful movements in history began as tiny seeds somewhere. The things that begin with a big bang, that become sensational overnight, are often the ones that do not last, that have no staying power.

On a personal level also, many of us have undoubtedly sown seeds which have had a magnificent effect for the good and we may never have known about it. There is a head nurse in a large hospital who exerts a find Christian influence on all the patients and on the staff which she supervises. A Sunday School lesson given in her childhood by a young minister caused a change in the whole direction of her life. When years later she told a friend what had happened, the friend asked her if she had ever sought out the person who sowed the seed and told him how it had changed her life. She replied that she had not but would now do so. After a long search she finally found the person who was now an old man rather sad and depressed.

She found it easier to write to him than to tell him the story. He wrote back, deeply thankful, but said he couldn't remember giving the lesson. The old minister dies shortly thereafter, and his widow wrote the nurse as follows: "You will never know what your letter meant to my husband. WE found it in his Bible after his death. He was very discouraged toward the end of his life, for he could not point to anyone in all his ministry who life had been changed by what he said and

did.” The seed sown by a young minister in a child’s life influenced not only that one life, but the lives of unnumbered patients and staff persons in a hospital.

So, the parables remind us that the growth of God’s kingdom is always going on even though we are not always aware of it. And sometimes the growth may be in places we do not ordinarily think of as being part of God’s kingdom. I believe that all movements throughout the world that work toward people having equal opportunity are part of God at work. All movements that work toward freeing people from the various kinds of slavery that seeks to bind us, are part of the growth of the seed of the Kingdom of God. And in the long run, such movements will succeed. The tiny seed grows into a large bush or tree. Often, it grows secretly for a time and then it becomes visible.

This past August, my wife and I were participants in a seminar to learn more about the Eastern Orthodox Churches. The seminar took place on the island of Cyprus, where we could come into contact with Orthodox church leaders, priests, and lay persons. One Sunday we attended the Orthodox church in the little country village of Ayia Napa. In traditional orthodox worship, the men and the women are in separate parts of the church building and the women do not come into the area where the men are during the worship service. Als, the women are supposed to be dressed in a modest fashion with arms and shoulders covered, no sleeveless sun dresses.

But we noticed in this little village church that some of the fathers brought their daughters into the place where only men are supposed to be. We also noticed one young woman of the village who walked confidently into the area of the church where only men were supposed to be. She kissed the holy icons, did her own acts of worship and after a time proceeded back to the women’s area. She wore a simple dark colored sun dress — shoulders uncovered. No one seemed to take offense. Later in the day we asked the local schoolmaster about the woman — the schoolmaster had been one of the worship leaders. He said, “She’s a woman of the new spirit.”

Seeds when planted begin to grow and continue to grow. There are many seeds of God’s kingdom scattered abroad in the world, some growing secretly, and some now becoming visible. There are faithful Christian communities in Russia, Communist China, East Germany, and in Cuba — Christians who continue to keep the faith. Who knows what large trees will grow from these seeds?

So, this is a parable of hope. God’s power continues to work in the world — often quietly, sometimes hidden, but God’s kingdom is here, and it cannot be overcome. No matter how out of control our little kingdoms may seem — God is ultimately in control. Amen.