

Often we look at these parables Jesus is telling about the Kingdom of God and see them as unreachable... or just parables for what we can look forward to after we die. This week we are looking at the mystery of growth.... That seeds planted that somehow grow into great things, but we don't know how. Other Gospels tell of these two parables as acts of faith.... 'If you have faith the size of a mustard seed', but Mark does not equate it to faith. He just says, Look at this tiny seed.... It grows into a the greatest of all shrubs so that even the birds of the air can find a home there. But what if we take these parables a step further.... Believing that the kingdom of God is not only reachable, but here and now.... And, indeed, within each one of us. In our sermon series On Being Human, we are looking at various parts of what it means to be human. Last week, Kindness. This week: Being seeded.

I think, as human beings, we rarely see the growth within us, either physically or spiritually.... This last year has been fun as many of the kids I used to see a lot and then didn't see for several months or a year due to the pandemic, are now huge compared to the last time I saw them! One, a twelve year old girl, grew nearly a foot during that time and now towers over her mom, and others have gone from baby faced tweens to hairy faced teens. I saw one on Tuesday who I hadn't seen in a while and his

voice has dropped, his chin hair has grown and his legs are beginning to stretch out!

But with spiritual or emotional growth, it's often much harder to see.

A Church goer wrote a letter to the editor of a newspaper and complained that it made no sense to go to church every Sunday. I've gone for 30 years now,' he wrote, 'and in that time I have heard something like 3,000 sermons, but for the life of me, I can't remember a single one of them so, I think I'm wasting my time and the pastors are wasting theirs by giving sermons at all.'

This started a real controversy in the 'Letters to the Editor' column. Much to the delight of the editor, it went on for weeks until someone wrote this clincher:

I've been married for 30 years now. In that time my wife has cooked some 32,000 meals. But, for the life of me, I cannot recall the entire menu for a single one of those meals. But I do know this... They all nourished me and gave me the strength I needed to do my work. If my wife had not given me these meals, I would be physically dead today.

We can laugh at this, but isn't it true!

Many people I work with in spiritual direction who are longing for healing get frustrated when they cannot see their growth or the same problem keeps showing up over and over. They lament, "Haven't we already dealt

with this? Why is it back?" And people who are grieving often feel this way too when something catches them by surprise and they find themselves back in the grief process once more.

Yet the reality is that we are continually growing, and as long as we are growing by following the light, all will be well! For sometimes we get caught up in following something unhealthy, lies that lead us astray and far from God and one another, even when they are wrapped up in words of reassurance and promises of just these things, such as cults and folk who end up caught in human trafficking for a couple of examples. But if we put the God of Love as the light we are following, growth will happen.

There is a Jesuit Priest, Greg Boyle, who works in one of the toughest parts of Los Angeles, an area filled with gang activity and violence and poverty. He is a man who nurtures the seeds of hope into the young people he works with, into the community at large, into the families that struggle to survive. In each instance he strives to see the seed of love that is in each person he encounters... sometimes it's easy but a lot of the time it is a struggle to see beneath the hard edges, the tattoos, the scars, the anger, the violence and substance use. Yet each day he heads out onto the streets again to water these seeds that God plants in each one of us with love and compassion and hope.

Greg was recently asked to do a training for social workers, and he took along two of the people he has worked with. Both used to be in gangs. One stood up to share his story. His name is Jose, and he is now in his late 20's, and works with the addiction recovery program at Homeboy Industries... the ministry that has grown out of Greg's work. Greg relates this story of the training:

Jose gets up, and he says, very offhandedly, "You know, I guess you could say that my mom and me, we didn't get along so good. I guess I was six when she looked at me, and she said, 'Why don't you just kill yourself? You're such a burden to me.'"

Well, the whole audience gasped. And then he said — "It's sounds way worse in Spanish," he said. At this the audience laughed.

And then he said, "You know, I guess I was nine when my mom drove me down to the deepest part of Baja California, and she walked me up to an orphanage, and she said, 'I found this kid. I was there 90 days, until my grandmother could get out of her where she had dumped me, and she came and rescued me.'"

"My mom beat me every single day. In fact, I had to wear three T-shirts to school every day." And then he kind of loses the battle with his own tears a little bit, and he says, "I wore three T-shirts well into my adult years, because I was ashamed of my wounds. I didn't want anybody to see them.

But now my wounds are my friends. I welcome my wounds. I run my fingers over my wounds.”

And then he looks at this crowd, and he says, “How can I help the wounded if I don’t welcome my own wounds?”

Through meeting Father Greg, through Greg’s watering of Jose’s tiny seed, the compassion and strength and love within Jose have grown into a huge shrub that now offers shade to many, that now have opened to help others.... Both those who show up at Homeboy Industries but also further out into the world. Did this 6 year old boy who was told to kill himself ever imagine he would be giving a training to 600 social workers? Yet the seed grew, nurtured and fed by God’s love dripping through Father Greg and others.

“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.”

One of the hard things about growth is not knowing how it happens. It makes it hard when we are doing the work for ourselves, or with another, for we want to know the predictable steps along way. How does it grow? What markers do we look for? How long will it take? And which will grow? We see this in nature all the time: I planted a row of beans, for example. Only about half the seeds came up. And, of these, about 1/3 have grown

tall, wrapping themselves around the sticks and string supporting them and starting to grow beans, 1/3 grew spindly and sickly looking and the other 1/3 have disappeared. Yet all were planted in the same row, received the same compost and same watering schedule. Why and how is a mystery. It's like this with humans too. Father Greg gave the same words of encouragement, the same compassion and love, the same time and energy to many young people from his parish. Jose has turned his life around. Some are trying to, some have died before the growth could set in, some have given in to the ways of gang life. What is it that takes hold? We don't know.

But this does not mean we should despair or give up. It does not mean that our work is in vain. And when we look at our own lives, it does not mean that no change is happening. It doesn't mean the watering is not working. I sometimes find I can say something to someone a few times before they can hear it, before it begins to take hold as a possibility. And, you can call me naive, but I believe that each encounter where we are met with the light of God, with compassion and love, is an encounter that changes us for the better. Like the man in the newspaper column, each one nourishes and strengthens us. We don't know how. We often don't even recognize it. But over time they add up and help us have the resilience and strength to turn toward the light and grow.

I once worked with a man, meeting him for spiritual direction every 3 or 4 weeks. He had just had a bone marrow transplant when I began to work with him, hoping to cure him of a rare form of cancer. His health was very up and down, and he kept getting infections for the five or so years I met with him. When we began he was fairly depressed. He had committed a financial crime many years before that he was not proud of, and had served time in prison for it, which helped his marriage fall apart and his wife turn his kids against him. His three sons were now grown men. But still wanted nothing to do with their dad, and he would get occasional news from his brother and sister about them. He was filled with shame and self hatred, believing, on some level, that he deserved to be this sick, that he was being punished once more for the crime he had committed so long ago. We had many conversations about God, about theology, about love, about how he was abused as a child, about his sickness, about his sons, about his losses and his dreams. What could he still do with all his health issues, was a topic we returned to several times. Some days we met he was too weak to talk, and I would just wait and pray with him or hold his hand. Some days he was talkative and animated. And each time we met I would remind him how much God loved him.... No matter what. No matter what had happened to him. No matter what crime he had committed. No matter what his sons thought. No matter if he was healing physically or not.

During the years we met, he fell in love and got married. He led a class at his church on suffering and God. He went to the ocean as often as he could. He did a little ministry with the county jail when he was well enough. And still, we returned to the question that often kept him awake at night. Was he loved?

I met with Mark about two weeks before he died. We did not know it would be our last meeting. He was doing well that day, but soon got an infection that led to his death. After he died his spouse contacted me with a message from Mark. During his time in the hospital he finally knew that he was lovable. He had had a dream that assured him of this truth. That God loved him. That he was open to love. That he was, deep down in the seed of his being, ok. He died knowing this truth, ready to be held in God's arms, ready to meet the God who had planted the seed of Mark so many years before, before Mark was even born. And Mark had been shown in this vision how much shelter he had provided for others in the branches of his life. That tiny mustard sized seed that grew into a great shrub of love. At the end he remembered. Sad as it was that it took him this long to really believe it, he died knowing the truth.

Nikita Gill wrote this poem:

One day when you wake up,
you will find that you've become a forest.
You've grown roots and found strength in them

that no one thought you had.
You have become stronger and more beautiful,
full of life giving qualities.
You have learned to take all the negativity around you,
and turn it into oxygen for easy breathing.
A host of wild creatures live inside you,
and you call them stories.
A variety of beautiful birds nest inside your mind,
and you call them memories.
You have become an incredible self sustaining thing of epic proportions.
And you should be so proud of yourself,
of how far you have come from the seeds of who you used to be.

As you go through this week, I invite you to reflect on the growth you have seen in your life. Where are you growing closer to God? How are you turning to the light? Who helps to water and nourish you? See how far you have come and rejoice!