

“Growing In Faith”

Rev. Dr. David Holyan

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

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2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17

So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord— for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For all of us must appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil. For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

Mark 4:26-34

He also said, ‘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. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.’

He also said, ‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.’

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you take the words and images that each of us carry within, the words that we offer in song and in prayer, the words that we've read from scripture and the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless, and transform all of these words into the living word of Jesus Christ. And let that word do its work within us, among us, and through us in order that we might love you more dearly and serve our neighbors in need, in order that we might be comforted in our places of hurt, encouraged in our places of doubt, and in all things guided in our desire to be faithful. We ask this in the faithful name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

I find myself, this Sunday, being attentive to, if you will, or mindful of several competing issues or situations that are going on in our common life. One of them is really close to my heart. It's the situation of the reality that, on Tuesday morning, I will be having my third spinal surgery in three years. The second is much more obvious. If you've noticed, there's a big, green bus out in front and I just called out two people you've never heard of before. A whole bunch of people are walking around with name badges. If you haven't heard, the General Assembly is in town and we are hosting commissioners for worship and lunch. And yes, there's still time to volunteer [laughter]. And then the third thing is the unfortunate reality that confronts our past, or our recently-- our evening custodian, who quit his job just two weeks and, this past week, found himself facing first-degree murder charges.

I find myself, and I know that I speak somewhat for the staff in this, that we find ourselves standing in a sea of broken glass, not sure which way to go and not sure how to make sense of what appears to be so senseless. But as I thought about these three competing things that are sort of a part of life, and if I am talking about my surgery, I invite you to think about those things in your life that are unexpected and lingering. I know many of you have had to learn what it's like to live with one less breast or a bag under your shirt. You've had a diagnosis that you're afraid to share with your family or your friends. So you can relate to that third element, but we find ourselves with these things coming at us. And the image that has struck me at the end of this week, yesterday evening, and again this morning, and I-- it seems to fit, so I'm going to share it, is of my wife trying to expand our garden in the backyard because we planted a garden with pails and buckets and garbage cans filled with dirt and she decided there needed to be a few more plants. And so she went out to get the drill and she walks in and says, "What drill bit do I use?" And I said, "Well, you've got to be careful because once you put it on the bottom of the bucket to make the hole, the drill's going to kind of walk around on you." And she stuck the drill bit in and went to the bucket and kind of pushed the button and it didn't quite do what it was supposed to do. And I said, "Hey, did you tighten the chuck on the drill bit?" And she's like, "What's a chuck [laughter]?" And so we made sure we got the right drill bit in. We tightened the thing down. The claws came together and gripped it. And she proceeded to drill a whole bunch of holes in new buckets so the water would drain out of the bottom.

I found myself, today, thinking about those teeth in the drill bit-- or in the chuck in the drill, that when you turn it, they come together and grab the drill bit and keep it tight and make it useful by keeping it from moving or having any space of itself. And the first thing that came together is-- that's coming at us, and it's so obvious, is General Assembly. There's been the unrelenting call to volunteer. The people in our own congregation have done such a remarkable job of responding to the call. Jennifer Picture, who is down at the convention center now, is actually in charge of the whole thing. Bill Stein, who was in charge of a wonderful worship experience yesterday with the music, it was phenomenal, with brass and a big choir, tons of beautiful songs. I have a photo of Karen in a smock, a volunteer smock, like the one that you'll see displayed by Peter Heard and Julie Grant in the front of the church, as she volunteered. She also helped coordinate people coming to churches. Zoe Martin was a liturgist. Brad Gift was in charge of volunteers. Christie Mitchell was helping. Sharon Croissant is helping. Members of the choir were down there singing. And we had a beautiful close-up of Mimi Fargo playing the flute [laughter] yesterday. And that's just the tip of the iceberg for the General Assembly and the members of our congregation that are joining with members throughout the local church to help make the assembly a success.

I went yesterday to hear the opening worship, to be inspired and to be supportive, to see what kind of message would happen, to hear the music. It was an amazing gathering of Presbyterians from across the nation with visitors from around the world who were there to worship. And they heard a story about Joshua, just as he's getting ready to take over for Moses, who had died, and he's going to head across the river, and he's told to be courageous and be strong and be bold and that God is with you. And the preaching and the message was all about how God is with us and we need to be courageous and bold and strong. And we're going to change the world because we are Presbyterians. Yes [laughter]! Amen! I'm ready to change the world!

It hooked me. I was proud, am proud, always will be proud of a church that understands what it means to be faithful to the gospel and connected to each other and to serve those in need. And then, as I said, we found ourselves, as a staff, and I know many of you have shared your thoughts upon the news of our friend Brian. I made the decision as the head of staff several months ago to welcome in an ex-convict who had paid his debt to society to become our evening custodian. Someone who had been homeless and under-employed, who suffered from mental illness, was under the care of the best doctors at BJC, who worked his way into a halfway house and then out of it once he found a job here. Someone who we all, together, believed in and someone we hoped we could help take that next step in the right direction. As a

congregation, we helped him get an apartment of his own. We helped him, some of you literally helped him to move into that apartment. We got him furniture and furnishings. We repeatedly encouraged him to not give up on this job or this place, in spite of his many-- many times, he was convinced that we were going to fire him for some reason. Over and over, I kept telling him, "Brian, we're not going to fire you. It's okay. Just do your thing. Do your job. You don't need to pay us back. It's all right."

And then, two weeks, three weeks now, in spite of every effort, he decided to quit. And when I was finally able to talk to him, he wanted his last paycheck. He told me that everything would be okay. I gave him the check, shook his hand, said, "God bless you. I hope it works out for you." And the next thing I heard was that he took the life of the woman whose name is tattooed on his right forearm. It simply makes no sense.

The next thing is the common thing that pushes at many of us, our health, or the situation, maybe, for our loved one's health. I stand before you terrified, at some level, of what's going to happen on Tuesday morning. And hopeful, as well. I've learned that those things are not mutually exclusive, terror and hope, and that somewhere in between them, there is faith. I have faith in the physician who I've trusted twice now to enter my body and make me better. I pray that this time, as he does so, the better will be bigger than before. I also want to say that, like many of you who are in similar situations and you let it be known amongst the congregation, that I appreciate your prayers and your encouragement and your support as I continue to walk through life with this uninvited guest that I have. But I've got to be honest that, at times, I find myself consumed by my concern for my own well-being and what will be the outcome of this procedure.

And so I come back to the drill bit analogy or the drill. I come back to this idea that the seeds that are planted grow first in mystery without much intention or attention. They just grow. And that they grow, the small seed grows and matures and is grown and matured, at least according to the parable, not for the fruit that it will produce but for the shelter that it will provide others. And as I think about the kingdom of God, I've learned and continue to learn that I'm appreciating more and more this idea that the kingdom of God grows in mystery and for the benefit of others. And that, somehow, we just are the people through whom the spirit works to do both of those things. In the midst of everything that's clawing for our attention, if you think about loosening that chuck of a drill, we realize that maybe we need to loosen the grip of the things that are clawing after our attention. Maybe we need to create some space between those things that claw and tell us, "Do this, do that, pay attention to me." Maybe we need to create some emptiness at the very center of who we are to allow the spirit of God to use us and lead us in faithful action for ourselves, but most importantly, for the well-being of others.

And so, this morning, I simply wonder aloud with you, what might it mean if we loosen the grip of the General Assembly upon us and its call to act in certain ways? What if we loosen the heartache and astonishment and bewilderment of a co-worker who's now charged with first-degree murder? And what might happen if we loosen the internal shouting that so many of us feel or hear because our bodies are not as we would want them to be? Could it be that, this morning, the good news of God, the good news of the kingdom of God is that each of us have the possibility to loosen the chuck of our own life, if you will? To remove the bit that we've chosen? To do the work that we think we need to do in order to allow God to use us? Are we called to loosen the grip, to change the world? Are we called to let down or let go of the anguish that comes when our hopes for another are shattered? Are we invited to loosen the grip of pain and suffering that makes it hard to see the needs of those in front of us?

I believe that the invitation of the spirit for each of us might be simply to hold that open space, to be attentive how God can work in the mystery and the dark and the dirt of our life to grow within us something that is fruitful for others, how God needs space in our lives in order for others to build nests of comfort and care where they can feed and nourish a family together in unity. This passage about seeds tells us two things about the growth of God's kingdom. It is a mystery that demands both patience and decision

and it is always for the benefit of others. Brothers and sisters, it is my hope that all of us can make that space and allow the spirit of God to do her work among us, within us, and through us all. Amen.