

Sermon Title: In By Inch, Row By row
Text: 2 Corinthians 5:6-17; Mark 4:26-34

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Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI
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We had a very interesting Session meeting this past Monday night. You know that for the past year we've had a series of conversations that grew out of and alongside the time of Sabbatical. It has wound its way through the congregation, and the Session and Deacons' retreats, the congregational meeting, and a series of smaller living room conversations that were held in the weeks after Easter. We've got a fair amount of paper to witness to the fact that there has been an earnest effort to sort of lift our heads from the plow and take a look at the road ahead, to see if we might clarify how it is that God is calling us to be the church in the years ahead.

But getting ideas "out there", filling flip charts and then collating their contents into packets of information, these are the easier part of the task. It's when the time comes to winnow, and sort, and funnel all those wonderful thoughts and ideas into real actions that we might take as a congregation that things get *much* harder.

That's the precise point the Session found itself at on Monday night. A small group of them had created a one page summary of all that had been heard in the last set of living room conversations, with seven bullet points of themes...really "need to's" for our common life, at least in the view of the 50 or so folk who sat together and thought about it this past April. The question set before the Session was whether these seven points adequately reflected what they had seen and heard in the past months, and if so, just what we should or *could do* in order to shape the life of our congregation to be more faithful to our common call.

There was not, in my humble opinion, anything in those seven bullet points—"need-to's" that were particularly earth shaking. Not even a hint that we need to build a new 50,000 square foot sanctuary next to a freeway exit, or do away with our church building altogether and meet instead in homes. There was no suggestion that we need to tear out the organ and replace it with banjos, or go back to the 1937 Presbyterian Hymnal. The suggestions were far more modest: we need to be friendlier to newcomers and to each other—involving folk in the work of the church because Session members understand that it's only as you get involved that the fruits of the church begin to unfold in peoples' lives. We need to be more deliberate in our life together—involving ourselves more intentionally, getting more people involved. We need to communicate better about what we do, both with each other, and with the community around us. We need to spend more time together, just plain vanilla time getting to know and enjoy each other, and directed time, growing our faith together in study and in prayer. If we could do these things, along with the other things that I suppose we almost take for granted in the life of this church—worshiping in ways that truly feed our souls, working together in mission, teaching our children and providing for the nurture of our youth—we'd be doing it. We would be living as the church God wants us to be in the 21st century.

The funny thing is, I don't think anyone at the Session meeting felt that this was not an appropriate summary of the conversations that have led us to this point. But it was somewhere on the way to that next step—what shall we *do* together to make these things a reality in our midst—that I think we found ourselves not so much stumbling, but certainly hesitant. Not, I

suspect, because we don't want to be all these things, but as I've thought about it through this week, perhaps because we weren't really clear as to how those relatively modest actions might be *sufficient*.

It was with all this swimming in my mind that I reeled myself back to this morning's Gospel lesson, and the stark reality that whatever direction the Session might take with such weighty matters as how we're going to fulfill God's call, there would be worship on Sunday morning, as a sermon to preach within it. What would Jesus have to say about all this? What advice or direction did he give to *his* disciples as to how they might fulfill the calling to which he had called *them*?

The problem, of course, is that Jesus did not pass out instruction manuals to his disciples on how to grow churches, or even act like a church. Truth be told, there's not much evidence that Jesus cared a great deal about churches at all. They were a later invention, probably owing more to Paul than anyone else. What got Jesus' passion rolling was what he called *the Kingdom of Heaven*. But even when he talked about it, it was not in terms of game plans, or purposes to drive at, or habits for highly effective kingdom builders. He didn't even give ten commandments, or three spiritual laws. When Jesus talked about it, he told stories—parables—that often raised more questions than they answered.

When it comes to Jesus' parables, including his parables of the Kingdom, Mark's Gospel is actually a very good place to start, because for the most part, he's not done a whole lot with them. He doesn't bother to add either context or interpretation, but just to say what Jesus said, and leave it up to the ages to come to grips with what it all might mean for them. In Mark's telling you can almost sense a tentativeness to it all—how Jesus just sort of threw the image out there, making it literally a *parable*—that as much as anything required the engagement of the listener, and above all else evaded any attempt to lock down its meaning. It's one of the most amazing things about Jesus' ministry, that after 2000 years of authoritative interpretations by more learned scholars and simple pastors, and cloistered monks than we would ever be able to tally, still, at the end of it all, we still need to tell the story, as Jesus told it, in order to understand what it means. What must we do to *be* the church in our day and age? I sense a shrug from Jesus. What's it like to be a part of God's reign? I see his eyes light up, and he says, "it's like this!"

It's like a seed, Jesus said. And as he thinks about it, and tells another story, maybe even a *mustard* seed. You want to know my honest reaction to that little bit of Jesus Wisdom, as I dragged it through the muck of session meetings, and sabbatical conversations, and the church of the 21st century? My honest reaction was, "Hey, wait a minute! I don't want to be the seed! I want to be the gardener, or maybe the landscape architect!" At least let me be a mighty oak, or the harvester who picks the good grain and brings it into the barn. Why do I have to be the seed?

The seed, after all, has absolutely no say in what it is to become. That's been taken care of by virtue of the plant from which it fell. It can't, by choice, or dint of will, become a sunflower, or a lily, or a good hearty cucumber vine. It's just gonna be what it's gonna be. And even in that, it has precious little say. The seed has no say in where it might be planted, or whether it gets the proper fertilization, or whether it chances to fall in the hands of a master gardener, or someone

like me who can kill the heartiest weed in nothing flat. It lives, or dies, to put a theological edge to it, by the grace of the hand that plants it.

It makes as little sense for a seed to say, “how shall I grow” as for water to wonder how it might be wet. And a little light comes on in my head, that I wonder if it’s not exactly the light Jesus intended when he sat with that crowd that had assembled around him beside the lake, and began to teach them. Maybe I wasn’t listening close enough to the question *I* was asking. Maybe it matters less how we *do* the church in the 21st century than how we can *be* the church, wherever it might be that the hand of the gardener seems to have planted us! Maybe instead of trying to decide what sort of plant we want to be, we need to set our roots down deep in the soil around us, and let our heads poke out into the sun, and air, and rain above us, and *become* that which God intends us to *be*!

Why is that so hard, I found myself wondering? But of course, I’ve already answered that in part. It’s hard because there’s something deep in the human way of being in this world that makes us think that we’d be much better at being God than God is. I’m afraid we’re a little too much like those pigs who’ve been trained to hunt truffles: terribly effective in finding them, but hopeless when it comes to keeping them alive.

Because somewhere deep down, right close to that part of us that wants to teach God a thing or two about being God, is a deep and abiding sense that this *should* all be for *me*—for my pleasure, my consumption, my glory, my joy. But did you hear the end of that first parable Jesus shared? Why was it, exactly, that the little seed planted in our minds by Jesus grows, “first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain?” It’s not so that people can walk by and say with deep admiration, “my, what a wonderful example of a wheat plant! Wish I had one like that in *my* garden!” Nope, it’s not off to the State Fair with me so that I can win the prize for best in class. We’re growing so that at the proper moment we can be harvested—and you know what becomes of harvested grain? Some of it is seed for next year’s crop, and the rest is the fuel for what comes next! It’s not about us, or for us, but for the world that meant, and means so much to God that it matters whether or not that Kingdom ever comes.

That’s why it may well be that the “next steps” that sort of brought the session up short on Monday are precisely those things that we did as we gathered this morning for worship, with friends from Harbor House and the Housing Partnership standing beside us. Maybe the *next* thing we need to be about as a congregation is to find ways like this, not just to share our treasures, but our time and our talents as well. Many of us will be involved right there in the months to come, working to create places of hope for women and their families whose lives have been shattered by violence. All of us will be invited to take just a little bit of the yield of our own fields of labor in order to make the dream come true.

What *none* of us can escape, if we’re attentive to the Gospel which is heard in our midst this day, is that in some way shape or form, if God’s reign is to break on this creation it will only be as the gifts that are entrusted to us—the gifts that *are* us—as fragile as seeds, are scattered, and nurtured. For it is as our gifts take root, as the fragile shoots of our labors peek through the cold ground and stretch out toward the sun that I truly believe we will begin to grasp that possibility which has been set deep within us by the hand of our loving God. Let us pray.