

*Growing and Tending*  
Lessons: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, Mark 4:26-32

A “parable” is a Bible word for illustration, a story or a picture that makes a point. In Jesus day, it was the main way that people taught. They heard parables for the lesson in them, and generally there was one lesson, though people could always find more. To hear the lessons today, we generally need to put ourselves back into the world of the hearers.

Mark gives us a collection of parables Jesus tells about the Kingdom of God - God’s rule as King in the world of God’s making. The Kingdom of God is everywhere, and everywhere God’s love is lived God rules. If God does not rule in a life, the seed is there but we do not grow it. The Kingdom of God is like a seed, and every seed has in the capacity to grow true to itself. So when God’s love is alive, God’s love grows. The Kingdom of God spreads because we spread the seed, and the quality of the growth depends on the ground where God’s love grows.

Sounds simple until you start thinking it over. Part of the inspiration that makes the Bible scripture for us is the way that these old events and stories translate into the purpose and meaning of our own lives and time. The parables become illustrations of our own world, stories about our own lives.

Sometimes the meaning for us is not all that clear. Stop and think about the Bible: There is a whole lot in here that we have a really hard time understanding.

Yesterday your elders going on Session were in a day to training, and we were talking about the Bible – especially those parts that just don’t seem to make sense with the God we see as Jesus. They asked about verses in Leviticus and laws about killing your children for doing something wrong, or the accounts of God wiping out the Israelite enemies like the bluecoats of the frontier calvary massacred the Indian tribes. [...Now, there’s an illustration full of lessons, too.]

Our trouble - I mean, “our” including MY trouble with the Bible, is getting lost in the minutia of the details in each verse so much that we lose the big picture in the whole story. The trouble is that we see all these different pictures of God in the Bible as one divine revelation - perfect pictures of God. There are just too many pictures in the album. We don’t know why they don’t look alike. There is only one God, but God must have multiple-personalities. Which picture for which situation becomes a puzzle. Which personality of the one God is going to show up where? How do we know which picture is true? ...Have you ever asked yourself questions like these?

Pictures can be imperfect or just plain distorted. Think about the photo on your driver’s license. Is that you? Well, sort of... but it looks like a mugshot, makes you look close to criminal. It doesn’t show that good, kind, law-abiding person who was accidentally speeding for a very good reason, officer. We wish we could put our own

picture on the license, one that showed the real us, ...sort of. Each picture of us is imperfect, and some are distorted.

Sometimes I think God must roll divine eyes at all those pictures people drew of God in the Old Testament. Human eyes were imperfect. A lot of them made God look like a bluecoat in the frontier massacres. Maybe the Old Testament is one of the places the calvary got the idea, ...sort of.

Since Abraham and the covenant, God has said, "Trust me and good things will happen, I promise." Then the Israelites would go off and do all kinds of things and think that God was helping them, and think those things were good. God surely didn't agree with a lot of their doings, but God wasn't going to leave them and start over. God had tried that before with Noah. God knew us humans were imperfect and needed more work.

Here's the miracle we see in the Old Testament big picture: *God trusted that what people were made to be from the beginning could win in the end, in spite of their not getting the true picture – of God or themselves.*

They kept drawing the wrong picture of God - the picture they wanted God to be more than the real God that was. They kept drawing the wrong picture of themselves, and kept thinking that God looked like that. They kept doing things and either blaming God or thanking God for the results, without stepping back and asking if God really had a part in it.

Why? ...maybe because they liked the picture they wanted of themselves more than the reality of who God made them; ...maybe because they could live easier with the God they imagined instead of the God who wouldn't leave them to their imaginations.

The miracle comes through the pictures in the Old Testament photo album: the real God trusted that it would work eventually because God never quits working on it. The trouble wasn't with who God was, the trouble was with the God people saw or the God people wanted or whatever people wanted that they thought God should give them.

So God put God's own picture out there for everyone. God sent the real and good picture - a completely real human person who was completely real God - everything God is and was everything God wanted humans to be. Divine Love in a Human Life! God said to name the boy Immanuel, "God with us."

And God thought, how can they miss with him for a model? He will correct their wrong ideas of me, and he will show them the right picture of what I want for them. He is so clear and so true that they can't get it wrong - unless they want to get it wrong (and of course, that is the real problem). At least from now on they will have to admit where the trouble is.

We have seen through our imperfect eyes the complete picture of God and humanity. That is why we have trouble in these details about God in the Old Testament. They don't add up to our big picture of God, the real and living parable we see in Jesus. How do we know which pictures are the good ones? We followers start

with the picture of God as Jesus. The rest of the pictures are distorted some way or another if they don't look like the God we see in Jesus.

God knows it will take some time to put things right, because people see what they want to see sometimes instead of living with the real person they are or God is. But God is patient. God trusts that the way God made us in the beginning is who we really are, and that is how we will become in the next beginning. God trusts that the way God wants it to be will become the way it is.

If we see the big picture of God from the picture and pattern of Jesus, then these parables about growing God's love in the Kingdom that Jesus tells take new meaning. Maybe I can apply the parable and make it clearer with a different picture.

Picture Northwood as a farm right where we are now before Pike was a paved Place. A long time ago, we were in the middle of farm country, or at really ranch country. Pike Place was first a farm trail to fields.

We at Northwood are farmers in God's field. We want to grow a crop of good people who love and serve God, so we go to God's farm and ranch supply and get some seed out of God's garden. We're surprised that God doesn't want any money for it. Out of love, God is giving the seed for love away free - all we want.

We come home and start planting the seed. We just throw it out there on the land. And sure enough, up it comes - but we have a hard time finding it in the weeds. This is not the Garden of Eden. It's Texas, and the sun seems to like the weeds better than the good crop which gets stunted with the drought. We harvest the crop, but the seed and the field don't produce much.

What do we do? Do we look at our harvest of good people and wonder why God didn't give us a bigger yield? Do we decide that we just got the farm on the rocky ground that won't produce and we have to get used to the smaller harvest? Do we try again next year thinking it is bound to get better if we just stick with the same plan? Do we decide that we ought to move to another farm that is doing better, because they got the good ground and we got the rocks and dirt?

Do we blame the seed, ...just had to be something wrong with it because we forget there might be something wrong somewhere else? Well, that would be going a bit far, seeing as we got the seed of love from God for free. There is one thing we know, even when we get lost in all kinds of details and reasons and excuses for the crop not producing much. There is nothing wrong with the seed that God gives.

There is something more we know about the seed from Jesus' parable. The seed will grow true to harvest, because God does the growing. The seed has in it all it needs to produce fruit or vegetables or people. And it always grows true to what starts. So there must be some other reason than the seed.

You know the point that Jesus is making, don't you. It's obvious and simple, once you remember the big picture of who God is, and remember the picture of the model in Jesus.

**God does the work of growing in the seed, but we have to do the work in the ground.** We do the plowing and do the watering and, yes, the constant job of weed-pulling that divert our focus and diminish our strength. We use latest organic methods of enriching the soil and of controlling the bugs and keeping the squirrels and deer away from the good stuff. It's a daily job, a constant task, and we have to do the farming to be farmers in God's field. **God does the growing, and we have do to the spreading and the tending. The tending is our call, and we have be attentive to tending God's field where we sow God's seeds.**

In my 20's I learned about gardening living with some wonderful NC people on land they had inherited for 7 generations. They had lived off the land for a long time, and they knew how much constant caring for the soil and attentive tending to the crop meant to getting a harvest from the seed that God would give in the growing.

Ernest and Anne worked all four of their gardens every day year round. He told me a parable one day the complements perfectly with the parable Jesus told that day long ago:

A gardener up Three Mile Road (and I knew it was Earnest) was famous for growing beautiful and tasty tomatoes. A neighbor (his brother Elgie) tried to compete with him, but always fell short. So in desperation, he finally asked the farmer how his tomatoes were so good.

"Well," the tomato expert replied. "Let me ask you something. Let's say you have hay in your field drying in the sun and ready to bale. Getting up from mid-day dinner table, you remember that you haven't dusted your tomatoes against the blight, so you go out to the shed to get the dust. But you look up in the sky and see rain clouds forming that will get your hay all wet. What do you do?"

"I run to the tractor and try to bale as much hay as I can while its dry."

"That's why you can't grow tomatoes."

Northwood is God's field and we are the farmers. We are in the early spring of a new growing season for God's love, and we need to remember that God does the growing. But we also need to remember the harvest of divine love in this place depends on our tending, and the tending depends our our attentiveness. The more we work the field, the more we will surely see what great things God will do with us.