

## The Growing Church

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on June 12, 1994.  
Scripture Lessons: 1 Samuel 15:34-16:13; Psalm 20; 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17; Mark 4:26-34.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

If we're to understand these two parables we must first understand the mood of the people who gathered around Jesus. <sup>It's early in his ministry.</sup> They're hopeful - the way many of us felt last October when the Phillies made it to the World Series. They hope that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah. They hope that he'll usher in the Kingdom of God. They've seen evidence of this. Jesus has been preaching that the kingdom is near. He calls people to repent and to get ready for its appearance. They also saw Jesus heal Peter's mother in law who had a fever. He healed a leper and someone who was paralyzed. He cast out demons. He healed other sick people in Galilee. So, on the basis of the words and deeds of Jesus, they hoped that the Kingdom of God would soon appear.

But they're also discouraged. Even though Jesus is very popular with most Galileans, the religious leaders are trying to put Jesus to death for claiming to forgive sins, for healing on the Sabbath, and for eating and drinking with sinners. Not only that, there are so many sick and demon possessed people still not healed. He hasn't even scratched the surface of human need. And he hasn't ~~even~~ begun to challenge the authority of the Romans who occupy Palestine. So the people have mixed feelings: discouragement, on the one hand, and hope on the other. What's going to come of the ministry of Jesus? What will be the final outcome?

Jesus tells two parables of the Kingdom of God to encourage his disciples. "Don't worry," Jesus says, "~~scatter~~ The seeds of the ~~Gospel~~ and the Kingdom of

<sup>will grow</sup>  
God in ways impossible for you to explain. We can sleep at night and enjoy our lives in confidence that God is at work in the world to bring about his kingdom. In the other parable, Jesus is saying that the Kingdom of God may have very small beginnings in Galilee but it would grow <sup>as indeed it has</sup> into a worldwide community of believers. So with these two parables Jesus encouraged his disciples to be patient, to have hope, and to scatter the seed of the Gospel with confidence.

I imagine that some of us are like the people that crowded around Jesus. We're hopeful and yet fearful about the future of kingdom of God within the field of the Presbyterian Church? This week the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA is meeting in Wichita, Kansas. Many of us are hopeful because we're going to commission about fifty new missionaries. But we're also discouraged ~~because some churches are withholding mission money because of their displeasure with the RE-imaging conference that I wrote about in the last Lamplighter. Many of us are hopeful because we see signs of the wind of the Spirit blowing across our church. But we're also discouraged by the divisions and infighting that have gone on in the church, especially over the last fifteen years.~~  
<sup>because of the uproar surrounding</sup>

We're also discouraged about the lack of growth in our denomination. Beginning in 1962 the membership of the church began to hemorrhage. We've lost between a quarter and a third of our members in the last 32 years, or about a million people. How did we lose them? Many of us died. A few of us left for more conservative, evangelical churches. Many of us dropped out of church altogether. But the biggest reason for our decline, according to many people in our church, is

that we simply stopped scattering the seed of the gospel in the world. We stopped planting new churches for the most part. <sup>The Assembly of God, Southern Baptists, etc.</sup> We basically abandoned the inner cities <sup>we preferred scattering seed among middle class suburban...</sup> and stopped scattering the gospel seeds there. We stopped inviting neighbors and new people in the community to Sunday School and Church. We stopped telling people why we find worship and Sunday School meaningful. We stopped telling people how the Lord Jesus Christ has made a difference in our lives. We stopped teaching our children that Jesus Christ is absolutely essential for our salvation and for the salvation of the world.

We stopped scattering the seed of the gospel and began bickering among ourselves. About a month ago I attended a Princeton Seminary Alumni meeting. Dr. Gillespie, the president of the seminary spoke. I understood him to say that our denomination no longer has a theological center. We've divided into all sorts of political action groups, each claiming our private agendas to be at the center of the Gospel - like one issue politicians. But, as a whole, we no longer agree as to what is at the center of our faith.

We have political action groups for liberals and for conservatives and for all kinds of causes. They meet and talk to themselves but they don't really talk to one another across their ideological lines. Rather they lob bombs into one another's camp, each blaming the other for starting the fight. So many of us find our identity in those political action groups rather than in our common faith in Christ. So many of us find our identity, primarily, in our gender or in our political ideology or in our sexual orientation or in some *ism* - rather than in Jesus Christ. In other

words we've turned in on ourselves and have stopped scattering the seed of the Gospel in the world.

Dean Hoge, a Presbyterian Scholar, conducted a study of the faith of baby-boomers in our denomination (Drew Smith and I went up to Princeton Seminary two years ago to hear him speak). In his research he interviewed hundreds of Presbyterian baby boomers - that is, men and women born between 1946 and 1964. He discovered that only about 20% of those baby boomers confirmed in the Presbyterian Church are now active. Most had dropped out of the church altogether. Why? They simply came to feel that they had no need of the church. But, Hoge, said, the number one reason those 20% are now active in the Presbyterian Church is that they believe that Jesus Christ is absolutely essential for their salvation and the salvation of the world. It made no difference if they were conservatives or liberals - if they believed that Jesus Christ is absolutely essential for the salvation they were, by far, more likely to be active, participating members of the Presbyterian Church.

Hoge concludes that if we want to retain our members as well as attract those outside and grow - we must recover our belief, the belief that is presupposed in the Bible and in our <sup>Book of Confessions</sup> ~~Confession of Faith~~ - that Jesus Christ is absolutely

essential for the salvation of this world and its people. St. Paul said, "we are convinced that one died for all - for all - for liberals and conservatives - and he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again." .. <sup>for Jews & Gentiles, for rich & poor, for good & bad, for believers & non-believers</sup> "The key to the world's salvation"

*And we do longer live for ourselves*

When we become convinced of that once more, as many in the church are already convinced, and as the church in other times and places has been convinced... we'll scatter the seed of the Gospel in the world, and in our homes, and in our communities and we'll see God work miracles which we can't explain - watch God bless the world with peace, and justice and salvation through the Gospel of the Kingdom in which all kinds of men and women, liberals and conservatives, rich and poor, red and yellow, black and white will find a home.

Let us pray: Great God: your word is seed from which faith and your church grows. As we receive the good news of your word, may your love take root in our lives and in our church, and bear the fruit of compassion; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.