

## I. Intro

This is the story of a congregational coach within a Mennonite area conference. She is a new congregational coach, in this role that calls for a seasoned person with pastoral experience to walk alongside a congregation's pastors and key leadership. A coach provides a supportive listening ear, keen observation skills, and an independent opinion.

As she begins in this role, she actively listens to what the church leaders are experiencing right now. But she also asks them to review the congregation's history ... to tell the story of who they are and where they have seen God at work. In this listening time, she hears them describing the character of the church over its 6 decades of existence. They name:

- A family-like sense of caring for each other
- Leaders who work collaboratively, with well-planned processes
- Attention given to issues of justice for marginalized people
- Generous support for God's ministries in and beyond the congregation

She also hears them name significant events in the congregation's living memory. Among others they include:

- Constructing and paying off their own building after meeting for more than a decade in rented space
- Bible Memory programs and Vacation Bible School for children
- A major celebration for their own 50<sup>th</sup> birthday as a congregation
- A Year of the Bible special churchwide emphasis

The coach hears of decades of many seeds being sown – Some leaders are excited about what God has done and is doing, while others wonder what there is to show for all the years, money and effort sunk into the life of this congregation. She sees church members who are strong doers in God's service, while at the same time some are asking how eager the church really is to listen to God's voice rather than to personal or cultural preferences.

The congregational coach relays back to leaders what she is seeing and hearing. She rejoices with those who are rejoicing, and she validates the bewilderment of those who are asking some hard questions about the relevance and future of the church. She smiles and tells them simply, "The kingdom of God is among you!"

## II. Today our Scripture, within a creation-focused worship series, feels safe and familiar at first glance

### A. I mean, these are the teachings of Jesus! Don't we Anabaptists forever repeat "Jesus is the center of our faith"?

1. What's more, today's teachings are bona fide Jesus material – they come to us in a manner of speaking that Jesus strongly preferred: parables!
2. The last verse of our text today goes so far as to say "With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them ... He did not say anything to them without using a parable"

### B. But parables are strange things to our 21<sup>st</sup> Century ears

1. On the one hand, especially in Christian circles, we know parables. Many of us have grown up hearing them.

a) In our ordinary conversations we say things like "He's such a prodigal son" or "I was a good Samaritan today". Without the familiar parables of Jesus these phrases would be meaningless.

b) Many of the parables are so familiar to us that they are now simply clichés, so that we get the concept of parables better than we get the meaning or the power of the parables

2. In fact, familiarity with Jesus' parables has sometimes bred outright dismissal of them. We may dismiss parables in the Bible for 2 reasons ... because they are either

a) Too obtuse and mysterious ...

(1) in the age of science, we expect communication to be direct, precise and clear in what it means ... We want people to tell it to us straight

b) OR we dismiss them because they are just too radical or irrelevant.

(1) Thinking about a parable of Jesus from Matt. 20, which of you as small business owners, would really pay the same wages to those who worked the whole day as to those who started working an hour before quitting time? (Matt. 20:1-16)

### **III. As you may have guessed, you can readily read Waterford Mennonite Church into the story I told of the new congregational coach**

#### **A. Has everything I described about that congregation literally happened here at Waterford? Not exactly.**

1. Is there "truth" for Waterford in this story? I believe so

2. As you will read in the Buzz in a few weeks, we are indeed getting a new congregational coach through Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference.

a) And the dynamics going on with the church in that story are very much what I've already seen or may soon see as we engage with a new congregational coach to walk alongside us.

b) We too have members who are very excited about what God is doing in and through Waterford, while we also have others wondering what difference church really makes.

#### **B. If you've closely studied biblical parables, or if you are just a "literary type" of person, you may have noticed that the story I led off with is not, strictly speaking, a parable**

1. It's a bit too straightforward and literal & not enough of a metaphor

2. What I shared doesn't require as much imagination as a good parable does
3. What I shared is really more of a dream ...
  - a) an envisioned scenario that might play itself out in our own setting
  - b) It's a glimpse of a pilgrim body of believers finding their way in the kingdom of God

#### **IV. In both of our Mark 4 parables, Jesus explicitly says the parable is an illustration of what the kingdom of God is like**

##### **A. So the disciples and the crowds don't have to guess why Jesus is talking about seeds, especially mustard seeds**

1. Jesus is describing the kingdom of God, which was the whole purpose he claimed God sent him to preach!
2. And this kingdom, Jesus says in Mark, is both a present reality and something that is yet to come
3. The message Jesus is trying to get across is this:

*The kingdom of God is here and in progress, with signs that are visible for those with eyes to see it AND YET the kingdom of God is also mysterious, requiring patience and trust in God to produce the harvest.*

(paraphrased from Timothy J Geddert, Mark, Believers Church Bible Commentary, Herald Press, ©2001, p109)

##### **B. In both our biblical parables and in the semi-parable that I told, there is definitely paradox ... a now-and-not-yet quality**

1. The picture of what's going on in these stories is complex ...there are no simple explanations ...
  - a) there's a tension between what the listener usually expects and what actually happens ...
  - b) an indefinite delay between the hopeful action and a visible result ...
2. In these stories, there are no guaranteed harvests, no easy reassurances ...
3. Both excitement and weariness are heard at the same time

#### **V. Please indulge me now to play out a little further my lead-in story of the congregation and their congregational coach**

##### **A. But this time I'm taking the liberty to insert some stories that actually do come from Waterford Mennonite Church.**

1. In the process of listening to the church leaders' narrative of who they are and where they've seen God with them, the coach hears 2 different stories ...
2. 2 different accounts of planted seeds with quite varying harvests:

## **B. About 10 years ago one of our members befriended a Honduran immigrant neighbor.**

This man had lost both of his legs above the knees, his nose and all ten fingers from meningitis contracted in Mexico on his journey to seek a better life here. Without a means to make a living with his hands, over the next 3 years several Waterford people surrounded Carlos, helping him into decent living arrangements, improving his English, getting a bicycle for him and inviting him into our church life.

The difficulties of life in a foreign land and culture, without supportive family led him to return to a tenuous future in Honduras. Life has continued to be extremely hard for Carlos but he receives very modest monthly support from some Waterford friends. In the June 20 issue of Buzz newsletter you can read his thanks to Waterford people for buying replacement artificial feet and orthotic liners as he tries to make a decent and safe life for himself in Mexico.

The seeds planted and watered with Carlos a decade ago produced a modest but sporadic harvest, which is still very much unfolding, held in God's hands.

## **C. Another Waterford planting story follows different contours:**

Over the years, under the guidance of more than one Waterford youth pastor, I have seen a few youth in early high school who continually pushed boundaries, exhibited difficult behaviors or resisted Christian faith for themselves, all to the deep angst of their parents and sponsors.

And yet, in a few but certainly not all situations, you can later see those very persons as young adults with a year of college under their belts. After only 3 or 4 years they have mellowed, matured almost miraculously and actually embraced Christian faith! What a miracle!

Right now I recognize with empathy those whose children have not yet lived into such bountiful harvest from the parents' years of seeds, planted with love and watered with tears. Nevertheless, as Jesus told it in yet another parable, we must join in the invitation of the shepherd who calls together his friends and neighbors, saying "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep!"

(Luke 15:6)

## **VI. Conclusion**

### **A. Yesterday I was blessed once again to sit in a circle of about 25 local Christian men, both black and white.**

1. This group, called Seeking the Beloved Community, meets in Elkhart monthly for honest, respectful and faith-based conversation about social issues and our witness as Christians. I serve on their planning group
2. Our discussion was spirited and very profound, about systemic racism in our country, and about how incredibly pervasive is its influence in our society, in our churches and in each of us
3. The challenge that struck me hardest is this:
  - a) Yes, those of us who are white today are not the ones who set in place white supremacist systems of political and economic control ... we inherited these evil systems, solidified over hundreds of years

b) But because we have benefitted hugely from white privilege ... because almost every aspect of our society was established to favor white people ... the power to weaken and dismantle racist systems also rests primarily with us who are white!

c) Therefore the responsibility to keep moving the needle toward the Beloved Community ... toward that vision of God's holy mountain ... is also especially our responsibility!

4. And sitting around that multi-racial circle of men, united in the vision of people from every nation and tongue together worshipping the Lamb, I was challenged and inspired!

a) Suddenly it was easier for me to envision the fantastic growth of mustard seeds here in our country ...

b) When you and I contact our US representatives and senators, and urge them to courageously resist further erosions and restrictions of people's voting rights ... the mustard seed grows!

c) When you and I see a person of color being harassed or treated suspiciously and we **don't** pass, and we respectfully intervene or look into the situation so that officers in power know their use of power is being observed ... the mustard seed grows!

d) When you and I decide to gently challenge racially offensive jokes or comments made in our presence, rather than keeping silent ... the mustard seed grows!

## **B. Last week in Pastor Cindy's sermon, she referred to the vision of God's holy mountain in Isaiah ch 65,**

1. She asked, "*What does God invite us to imagine today? What will life look like together on the mountain of God?*" Those questions fit well with the Parable of the Growing Seed.

2. As we sing from Voices Together a beautiful new song which sings like a Reader's Digest of parables of Jesus (VT 298), I leave you to ponder 3 questions from today's parables:

a) *What seeds have we planted in the past?*

b) *What kind of harvest have we seen?*

c) *What seeds are we planting now?*

## **C. May God's harvest be enriched in the seeds we sow!**