

The Church is a Living Thing
Natural Church Development Sermon Series #01
April 6th, 2008

Series: Natural Church Development
Scripture: Mark 4:26-29

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Stacey D. Jones on April 6th, 2008 at
Northminster Presbyterian Church.**

Since moving to Ames, I've run into people I knew from years ago when I was serving a church in Des Moines. Some of them have commented that it was time for them to get back to church. Some of them haven't. But every one of them has been invited by me to visit us here. Some of them have, some I am still waiting to see.

Like many of you, evangelism doesn't come easy for me. I don't like to make people feel uncomfortable by raising the specter of an unexamined life or sloppy spiritual habits. It's not as if my life is a paragon of virtue – just ask my family!

However, I felt comfortable inviting my friends here because I knew that at Northminster Presbyterian Church of Ames, we are striving to be the kind of church where all feel welcomed in the name of Christ. We are not a church with a cookie cutter mentality of what Christians look like. We know that your faith journey will look different from my faith journey, and that it is all right for them to be different. Our mature members will help those just beginning answer their questions, and the questions of those just beginning their journey will challenge those of us who have been part of a church for a long time to find answers that make sense to a new generation of seekers. What holds us together is our desire to know Christ and make him known.

So for the next 9 weeks we are going to be looking at two books: The Bible and Color Your World with Natural Church Development by Christian Schwartz. Both are books which emphasize that faith is a journey, not a destination. I hope that the principles of Natural Church Development, which honors the diversity of the faith journey, will help us become a growing church: growing in faith and growing in size.

This morning we begin with a different concept of what we mean by "church." When my friends have said to me, "It's time for us to get back to church," they meant it was time for them to take the plunge and cross the threshold of our church property. However, the biblical images of church are not its buildings.

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In the Old Testament there are buildings – synagogue and temple, but even there what made a church is a living breathing dynamic: Ten men/people – a “minyan”. It took ten people for there to be a worship service. If you wanted to circumcise a child, you had to have ten people. If you wanted to get married, you needed ten people. If you had to bury a loved one, it required ten people. You could have your own private devotional life, but if you wanted to go to church (synagogue) there had to be people; ten of them.

In the New Testament there were no buildings other than what the Old Testament already describes. There was the synagogue and the temple, but if you were not Jewish and wanted to follow Jesus Christ, your church life was in small groups. In fact the biblical images used in the church aren't about buildings at all.

The Greek word for church is ekklesia which is where we get the word ecclesiastical so that when we think of church we tend to think of structure. However, the word has little to do with structure. It literally means “called out.” So church is made up of people who are Called Out of the world as we know it to build a community which models the Kingdom of God here on earth.

In the New Testament the church is described as The People of God who are called out (1 Peter 2:9). It is also called the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12), the household of God (Ephesians 2:19; 1 Timothy 3:15). The Church is not a building. It is a living, breathing body of people who are called to be the demonstration of God's love to the world in which we live.

However, we don't always think of the church as a living organism which represents the body of the Lord, Jesus, do we? We are more comfortable with structures than we are with organic development. We live our lives by the structures we create, and then the structures take over and dominate our lives.

I am reminded of that old chestnut which is told about the little boy who is standing outside the Sanctuary looking up at a plaque when one of the elders comes along and says, “Do you know what that plaque is for?” The boy shakes his head, and the elder responds, “That is a plaque to honor all those men and women who died in the service.” The boy looks at the elder and says, “Which one; the 8:30 or the 11:00 service?”

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This morning our text is a parable on the Kingdom of God which we find only in the Gospel of Mark. The Kingdom of God is different from the church. It refers to the reign of God or that time when God's will is done perfectly on earth as it is in heaven. It is not the church, the ekklesia, but it is the goal toward which the church strives.

Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to seed being scattered on the ground. The one who scatters it goes to bed, and the next morning the seed has already begun to grow. In the words of a familiar Thanksgiving hymn, "First the blade and then the ear, then the full corn shall appear. Lord of harvest grant that we, wholesome grain and pure may be." (Come Ye Thankful People, Hymn #551 in the Presbyterian Hymnal)

Among my gardener friends I hear them relish in the image Jesus uses. Some have said, "once the ground has been prepared and the seed has been planted, there isn't much more the gardener can do but water, weed and wait for the harvest."

So if we believe the Kingdom of God is the goal toward which the Church continues to strive, then the seed is the Word of God; and if we believe that Jesus was right; that the Kingdom of God is like seed which is sown in the lives of those who believe, then it is up to us to water, weed and wait as we nurture our faith to maturity.

WATER

The seed is the word of God. It is planted every day by simply reading it. It is planted every week by coming here to listen to it preached.

We water the seed by studying the Word: alone or in small groups. We learn to discover the content of the Bible and the context in which it was written. We ask questions about what it must have meant to the people to whom it was addressed. We seek to understand what it means for the times in which we live.

The other day at the doctor's office I was looking for something to read and my eyes fell to an article on treasure hunting. The author stated that when he bought his first metal detector, the man who sold it to him gave him two pieces of advice. First, if he ever found something buried in the ground, before filling in the hole, he should always scan the hole once again. The salesman insisted that oftentimes where there was one coin, there would be others, and he was right.

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Secondly, the salesman told the author never to believe that a place had been “hunted out,” meaning that all the treasure had been taken. “For the patient hunter,” he said, “there will likely be another treasure waiting.” Once again the salesman was right.

The author told about hunting the site of a home built in the late 1700’s, a property that he had been told had been hunted out. He started scanning early that morning, and hunted for six hours without finding a thing. Just when he was ready to give up, he started getting signals – one right after the other. He dug out so many coins they were literally running out of both his pants pockets.

Veteran students of the Bible can be sure that, no matter how much we dig, the Word will never be exhausted.

WEED

We also have to be careful to weed out those things in our individual lives, as well as our corporate life, which can impede the growth of the seed that has been scattered in us. Again, the gardeners among us know that whatever we allow to grow will have the advantage. Growing things always have the advantage, but negative things can choke the positive if we don’t work hard to remove them.

The flower beds at 1325 Wilson are full of weeds, and it takes constant vigilance to keep them from taking over. When I go out of town during the summer I spend several hours getting rid of as many weeds as I can find. Yet when we come home, there they are again. Its as if all my efforts have gone for nothing.

The other day I thought how like our faith journey are those weeds. If we fail to pay attention to the things in our lives which do not belong in the life of faith, it won’t be long until they take over the journey, and it will look as though we are growing weeds and not healthy plants. If we fail to pay attention to the self-interest in our lives, it will not be long until it takes over that which is healthy and chokes off our growth.

WAIT

Finally, the good gardener is patient and waits for the growth. Growth doesn’t take place all at once. It is often imperceptible, and we can become impatient, but if we have sown the seed to God’s word in our lives and paid attention to remove the negative things which can quickly take over, then in time the growth will come.

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In 1940, Clarence Jordan founded Koinonia Farm in Americus, Georgia, as a haven for racial unity and cooperation. In 1954, the Ku Klux Klan burned every building on the farm except Jordan's home.

The next day, the reporter showed up for a story about the arson while the rubble was still smoldering. He found Jordan in a field, planting seeds. He said to Jordan, "I heard the awful news of your tragedy last night, and I came out to do a story on the closing of your farm."

Jordan just kept planting and hoeing. The reporter continued his prodding, with no response from Jordan. Finally, the reporter said, "You've got two Ph.D.'s, you've put 14 years into this farm, and now there's nothing left. Just how successful do you think you've been?"

With that statement, Jordan stopped hoeing. He said to the reporter, "You just don't get it do you? You don't understand us Christians. What we are about is not success, but faithfulness."

Allow me close by telling you that I find this to be one of the most exciting times I've ever seen in the life of a congregation. Our staff, from Pastor to Janitor, not only feels called to ministry, but they feel called to ministry at Northminster Presbyterian Church. Our impact in our community and abroad continues to be both positive and effective. We have visitors who are considering becoming members with us nearly every Sunday.

We are poised for growth – in faith and in size. However, if we are to grow, we will need to water, weed, and wait; and allow god to bring the seeds planted in us to harvest. The church is a living thing. Let's treat it that way!