

## Embracing Growth

### Matthew 13:31-35

If your household was anything like mine growing up you would have had a door frame or perhaps a door itself where your parents marked off your height as you grew older and taller. Did you have a place like that in your home? As children my brother and sister and I had our heights marked off on the side of a wardrobe. As the youngest in my family that wardrobe was a source of excitement and frustration: excitement as I saw my name inching bit by bit up the wardrobe but frustration as my brother and sister were always ahead of me. “Will I ever be as tall as them?” I remember asking myself

Now as a parent I’m starting to go through the process again with Theodore. Each visit to the doctor results in another mark on the growth chart. I’m finding another emotion is added to the excitement of watching progress. Now there’s an element of worry: is the right kind of progress being made? The worry is there because I know that human beings *are meant to grow*. Just like you don’t plant a tree without expecting growth, just like you don’t invest some money without expecting growth, so too the human body is one of those things that you expect to grow.

But only up to a point! Once you hit adulthood you expect to stop growing. Early last week we had the first really warm day of the season, remember? I thought to myself, “this is the first day for shorts!” And so I dug down into my cupboard and pulled out shorts that I hadn’t worn since the beginning of the year, and as I sucked my stomach in to do up the button I said to myself, “I think I’ve grown here!” That’s the kind of growth you don’t want to see happening! Somethings are meant to grow: young children and teenagers, they are meant to grow. And somethings are not meant to grow: waistlines are not meant to grow.

Here’s a question for you: In which category would you place the church? Is the local church—our church here, Waitara Anglican—are we a body that is designed for growth or designed to remain the same? Sometimes I feel it’s hard to know which category to put the church into. Surely a growing relationship with God is a good thing. Surely more people in church is a good thing, especially if it means more people engaging with God and engaging with his people. But from a merely human, pride-filled perspective, it would be *a good thing* to have more people in church! It would look good! It would feel good! The world around us would be put on notice! We’re strong! We’re powerful! It’s hard to balance it up, I think. Is the church a body that’s meant to grow, or is it a body that’s meant to do not much more than what we are doing now?

We need some guidance on this issue. And thankfully Jesus himself has a couple of things to say about it. In our Bible reading we heard Jesus use two images that speak about growth, the image of a mustard seed growing into a plant and the image of

some yeast being worked through a batch of dough. Two different images describing two different types of growth.

The first image is there in verses 31-32 He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. <sup>32</sup> Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches. What is it that’s growing in this picture? Right at the beginning Jesus says this picture is about the *Kingdom of Heaven*. We still have Kingdoms in our modern world. Only this week Thailand has lost its king, Rama IX (otherwise known as Bhumibol the Great). Until his death he was the longest currently serving monarch.

A Monarch has a people to rule and a land in which they live. And the God we worship is no different. The people are those who place their trust in Jesus Christ as King Savior, and one day he will return and we will live with him in a renewed world. Until that time though, the Kingdom of Heaven can be seen whenever those people gather together and form a church. We meet as subjects of the King, as people who listen to his voice, who seek his help, and who aim to go out and represent him in our daily lives. And Jesus predicts that this is a Kingdom that will have an exciting story to tell.

It’s a Kingdom that starts off small. He likens this Kingdom to a mustard seed, which he says is the smallest of all seeds. Think back to the church’s humble beginnings. A group of frightened disciples meeting behind a locked door, their leader crucified, not knowing what was going to happen next. It was a beginning as insignificant as a seed the size of a pinhead.

But what did happen? Seven weeks after his resurrection during the festival of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit of Jesus descended upon the Apostles and through the preaching of Peter 3000 people were added to the church. In other words, the seed grew and became a bush. And then, in the history that follows, men and women came to faith all over the world and the bush became a tree. God’s Kingdom is something that’s designed to grow in size. Jesus says that the seed becomes the biggest plant in the garden.

We get a sense of why size is important at the end of verse 32: the birds come and perch in its branches. Some other English translations say the birds come and make nests in its branches. Just like a bird will come and make a home in a large tree, so too men and women will come and make a home in the church. Why use language of “making a home”? Why not simply talk about “attending church”? Because people are designed to have God as their Father, people are created to have spiritual brothers and sisters in the church, people don’t become who God wants them to be until they join his family, and God is building a big family where people find rescue from the destructive nature of sin, where people can grow into who God wants them to be, where people can find an eternal future.

And the more branches the tree sends out, the more people can take part in it all. Church growth is important because it's about more people finding shelter. The growth Jesus has in mind isn't about growing in order to look good, it's growth for the benefit of others. This is why it's never good to be satisfied with a church that stays the same, because you're saying that it's ok for people to shut out in the spiritual cold. The Kingdom of Heaven, of which we are a part, is a Kingdom growing in size.

And it's a Kingdom that is growing in another dimension as well. The second image Jesus has is there in verse 33: He told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough." Like the image of the mustard seed, the image of the yeast also starts with something small. For a time Jas and I were making our own bread with a bread maker at home. In went the water, in went the flour, and then I'd get my finger and just make a small hole in the top, and I would get my special yeast spoon (a tiny spoon) and into the hole would go a tiny amount of yeast. And then over night the yeast would work through all the dough. The basics of bread making haven't changed in 2000 years. In the morning the yeast would have done its work, and the result would smell amazing!

If the image of the mustard seed is meant to emphasize growth in Kingdom size, then the image of the yeast is meant to emphasize invasiveness. The Kingdom of Heaven is spreading into all sorts of different corners. When we leave church today each of us will go back into another context. Some of us will go back into families where we will be the only Christian. Some of us will go into work places where we are the only ones who believe. Some of us will go to schools where our influence will be the Christian one. Make no mistake, our presence in those places is no accident. God has put us there deliberately; like yeast our witness is spread around. This is why personal growth in Christian maturity is so important. It's so important to be growing in knowledge so that we have an answer when people ask us questions. It's so important to be growing in joy and gentleness so that we make the gospel attractive. It's so important to be growing in our trust in God so that when the challenges to our faith come we remain unshaken.

The growth that Jesus wants is both quantitative and qualitative. His Kingdom is growing in quantity and also in quality. but this is something that I don't really need to tell you. In August and September I visited most of our small groups. There is still one small group I am yet to visit, but so far I've visited all but one. And I asked the groups to fill out a short questionnaire. One of the questions was this: "In 5 years time how do you hope our church will be different?" Basically the answer is that we want to grow. In 5 years time we hope that we will be bigger.

Bigger in terms of *quantity*

- the most popular response was "increased membership"; people want to see more people worshipping at church.
- People want to see a growth in the amount of ministries we run;

which is a good thing because the more ministries we have,  
the more opportunities we'll have to connect with our community.

- Some people want to see more space.

These are dreams about size. This is about seeing the tree grow larger, about providing spiritual shelter for more and more people.

And people want to see more maturity.

- Increased levels of participation was the second highest response.
- A greater sense of church being family
- More evangelism,
- Deeper discipleship

These are all maturity issues, the kind of maturity that will help us be effective disciples. Isn't it good to know that we're on the same page as Jesus? Praise be to God!

What might this growth look like in real terms? Well, back in May I asked our Parish Council what *they* wanted to see. I asked them all to write their answers separately on a sheet of paper, and their answers were really interesting - A numerical figure emerged! Now, a poorly attended Sunday for us is about 150 people, a really good Sunday for us is over 200. The number that came up from a few members of PC was a number between 300 and 400 people attending church on a Sunday. So putting that together with the results of the survey, I think a longer-term goal is to double our attendance here on Sunday. It's a number that will maximize the use of our facility here. A church that size would fill our auditorium here 3 or 4 times on a Sunday. The next step after that, to grow beyond 400, would call for a very radical change in the way experienced parish life. It would mean either: changing our ministry philosophy to one of church planting; or it will mean selling this building and buying another. That would be an exciting decision to make, wouldn't it? But we won't ever get there unless we grow from where we are. The first goal is to maximize what we've got.

A more medium-term goal is to rethink how we are using the rectory. Right now it's being used as a residence, but the PC are rethinking what we can do with that space. We have already engaged an architect to come up with a concept that involves turning the top floor into a unit, and converting the bottom floor into ministry space. The backyard could be a courtyard with access from the hall, we could have access from the foyer as well. We don't have costings for that, and at this stage it's not *much* more than an idea, but in 2017 you may start to hear more about it.

Of course, just changing the building isn't going to be enough to foster growth. The main strategy is to pray and work on our growth as disciples, *because the most likely person to make a new disciple of Jesus is someone who is growing in their own faith.* And *right now* there are two opportunities for us to deepen our discipleship.

Let me speak a little bit about our student minister, Matthew Morrison. Matthew has been at our church for many many years. And in terms of hours volunteered for our

church he's one of a handful who are right up there. These hours have been spent leading bible study, serving on Parish Council, leading services, preaching, and together with a committed team, they've also been spent leading our youth work: WAY Friday night, and 6:45 church. Late last year Matt decided to head into ministry full time, and so he enrolled in Moore College where he's taken to theological study like a duck to water. He loves it! We decided to employ Matt as a student minister one day a week, with a special responsibility for the youth work. We funded this position for one year from our future fund, and now we need to fund it from the congregation.

Our youth work is relatively small, but I want you to think about the mustard tree. Things that start small can grow and develop over time, and God willing this is what we want to see with our youth ministry. You want to see a chain develop: children's > youth > young adults ministry, which then feeds back into children's and youth ministry as the young adults ministry provides leadership. Having a dedicated staff position, even if only one day a week, is a great step in getting that chain going. We have children's work that is well received, the next step is to foster the youth and youth adults, and Matt's role is a critical part in deepening that work.

Let me also talk a bit about music. The importance of music in our growth as Christians is brought home to me every second Thursday at the Masonic Towers Nursing Home over here in the hospital. On those days I run a worship service in the hospital, I lead the residents in prayers, I read and teach from the Bible, and I also lead in the singing of some hymns. Many of the residents have dementia, some can barely communicate, and many have trouble understanding what I say. But some of them really come alive when we sing. They remember the hymns. I can read out God's promises from the Bible until I'm blue in the face, but when I sing them in the words of a hymn, that's when we see a response. Jesus told us to love God with all our heart mind and soul, to love God not only with our intellect, but with all of our being. Music has an ability to penetrate parts of us that can be really hard to get to, when God's word is attached to music they can have a profound impact. We heard this when Tina Abraham gave her testimony a few months back. Music played an enormous part in leading Tina to faith.

I believe music is a very important part of our Christian growth, and so I'd love to employ a music person to help with our music, especially on Sunday mornings. You might think, "What's wrong with our music as it is?" Well, at the moment our music at 10 am sounds great, but the Whitbourn's are heading overseas in December, that will leave a hole, Emily is playing a lot of music at 10 am, even though we actually employ her to do Children's work at that time, freeing her up will benefit our children's ministry. At 8:30 we don't have any musicians, we sing to a recording. (By the way, if you can play the piano and you don't mind volunteering to play at 8:30 maybe once or twice a month, that would be a great ministry you could embark on!). The best scenario would be to get someone who could play the piano at 8:30, and then strap on a guitar and help lead the singing at 10. Someone who could get beside our volunteers and help them be the best volunteers they could be. But it all

depends on whose available and what they can do. If people gave enough, we could extend that person to help out in the evening. Music in the evening has a bit more depth at the moment, but even then, Penny is heading to Namibia, so there's another hole.

So friends these are two opportunities that are in front of us to help deepen our growth as Christians. What can you do about it? Last year at this service I asked for \$15k dollars, and you gave \$17k. This year I'm making an appeal for \$20k; \$20k to pay for Matt's student ministry position and to employ a music director for Sunday mornings. On top of that, there are some important pieces of equipment we need to buy, like a new sound desk for the hall.

Parish Council have made the decision that if we raise 20k now, then we will be a great position to do these things in 2017. Jas and I are getting the ball rolling with a check for \$750; \$750 on top of our regular monthly giving, \$750 on top of what we have promised Ben and Penny. I do this not to show off, but to provide an example of the kind of giving that's required. If 30 families in the church made the same commitment then we'd be well over our target. You can write a check and put in an envelope in our offertory with "Celebration Sunday" written on the front, or you can make an electronic transfer and put "Celebration Sunday" in the description field.

The way Jesus tells the story, the Kingdom of Heaven is growing whether we like it or not. The seed *will spout* and become a plant. Our decision is whether we want our own branch to grow along with the rest. We've said that we do! So here's a first step in attaining that goal. I pray that you'll consider making a contribution.

We'll be led in prayers now by Nick and Alex.