***“It Grows, He Knows Not How”*** by S. Finlan, at The First Church, June 20, 2021

**Philippians 1:6–7; 2:12–13**

6I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. 7It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God’s grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. . . .

12Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; 13for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

**Mark 4:26–33**

26He also said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, 27and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. 28The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. 29But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

30 He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? 31It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 32yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

33 With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it.

Welcome to the official start of summer. June is also the month when we recognize the accomplishments of our young adults as they graduate. We can also give recognition to their families who have encouraged and supported them. Every aspect of life grows and blossoms when effort and love are applied. Physical growth is easy to see; spiritual growth is unseen and mysterious.

Today’s Scriptures combine to give us a great message: that God is at work in you, no matter how unimportant you may think you are. Each of us is truly important and our voice is needed as a part of God’s family. Right now, God is working away on your inside, scrubbing and honing and shaping to help you be ever more receptive to the Spirit and to God’s will, helping you “both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil 2:13). God also helps you to listen and to resonate with his whisper within your soul.

How does this activity manifest itself? How can we see it? Does it result in perfect behavior, saintly holiness, doctrinal precision? No. It’s less rigid than that. It’s *gradual* growth; it’s a process, like the growing of grain. The farmer uses good soil and he waters the plants, but the grain grows by itself, he knows not how (Mark 4:27). In fact, it grows while he sleeps, Jesus says. So it is with our spiritual growth. It is unconscious. True, we provide the right environment for growth. We water it with prayer and worship and study, but the actual growth is God’s doing. It happens while we’re not looking.

We are the grain in God’s garden, except, in our case, at least as adults, we have some say in whether we get good soil and water. Good soil is the proper environment, a healthy and stable life. The water in our spiritual analogy is spiritual nurturing of all kinds: loving and being loved, prayer, and other spiritual practices. Once we take in those nutrients, we then just have to faithfully wait for God to provide the actual growth. We don’t make growth happen; we *allow* it to happen. And it will happen in stages, “first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head” (Mark 4:28). At each stage we will become more receptive to God’s guidance and more effective at sharing God’s love and kindness with our fellows.

Think of how often Jesus used grains and fruiting trees as metaphors for spiritual growth: fig trees, mustard seeds, this planted seed that grows overnight, the idea of the vine to which we must stay connected, “bearing fruit with patient endurance,” each tree being known by its fruit, and tenant farmers needing to produce fruits in their seasons (Luke 13:6–9; Mark 4:31, 28; John 15:4; Luke 8:15; 6:44; Matt 7:16–20; 21:41). All these images stand for spiritual growth. Jesus grew up in a farm-centered culture, and knew that his followers would be able to grasp his meaning.

It is a great relief to hear that we don’t have to force our own growth, that it happens we “know not how,” even while we are asleep. How could we construct such growth on our own? It is God who has the design plans. Growth is a wonderful gift that we just receive, rather than having to fastidiously and carefully shape it. This allows us to be more relaxed and even self-forgetting. From a small beginning, it can develop into the greatest of plants. And growth is not forced upon us; we have to choose to allow it. As long as we are doing the right things, we need not agonize about the pace or the content of our spiritual growth, because we know it will come in due season. Just keep Jesus as your guide.

There was a captain of a ship who looked into the dark night and saw a light in the distance. Immediately he told his signalman to send a message, “Alter your course ten degrees south.” He promptly received a reply, “Alter your course ten degrees north.”

The furious captain sent another message, “Alter your course ten degrees south. I am a captain!” Soon another reply was received, “Alter your course ten degrees north. I am seaman third class Jones.”

The captain sent a final message, “Alter your course ten degrees south. I am a battleship.” The reply was, “Alter your course ten degrees north. I am a lighthouse.”

We must not try to direct our own lives, but yield to the direction, the guidance, of Jesus. You can’t argue with the lighthouse. https://ministry127.com/resources/illustration/i-am-a-lighthouse

We can trust, as Paul did, “that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion” (Phil 1:6). Sometimes you may have the guiding hand of a fatherly figure like Paul, sometimes you may have to work it out on your own, when the father figure is not present. This is what Paul is talking about when he says “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12). We might prefer to say “work it out with your own reflection and effort.” The emphasis is not supposed to be on fear as such, but on taking responsibility for your own growth.

As usual, there is a bit more serenity in Jesus’ words than in Paul’s. Paul is often doing spiritual battle. Jesus has already won the battle, has already overcome the world (John 16:33). Jesus is the real father figure, for me. His calm confidence and clear sight, his energetic affirmations and his heartfelt denunciations, his kindness to the vulnerable people and his preparing a place for all of us—these are the actions of our spiritual Father, although he is our elder brother as well as our father—a brother in that he knew suffering and rejection and injustice and the incomprehension of neighbors and family. He mourned for the lost and the blind, but he never stopped extending the offer to anyone who would listen.

And for those who listened, he provided some teaching about spiritual growth: its necessity, its gradual step-by-step nature, and the need for spiritual listening on our part. “Ask and you shall receive” (Matt 7:7).

Pablo Casals was considered by some to be the greatest cellist. When he was 95 years old he was asked why he continued to practice 6 hours a day. He answered, “because I think I’m making progress.” <https://ministry127.com/resources/illustration/continually-growing>

We never outgrow the need to make progress. There are always more steps to take, just as there are for our young graduates. And so we go forth today, curious, excited for the new adventure in our life’s journey. Some days we may be drawn through rocky pathways, and other days along sunny garden lanes, but we know that we have Jesus as our traveling companion, and God as our guide. And think of all the stories we may share along the way.