

Walking Blindly

Just what does it mean when we claim that we walk by faith...does that mean that we are walking blindly? Or does it hint at the fact that our physical sight may not be the most reliable source of information on which to base crucial decisions? Probably because of the many changes in the ways information is spread in our society today, this is a subject not only on my mind, but has become a matter of much debate...and also much mis-information. There is now a whole new vocabulary which I once would have not believe could be possible...that there are now "alternative facts" for about every situation...Proof is not needed for something to be a fact...only strong belief....sorry...I do not accept "alternative facts" as real facts, but I do accept that they have become a reality of this time and place. Although we did not read from the epistle lesson, in the text from 2nd Corinthians 5:7, the Apostle Paul wrote something which can be very helpful for us: "for we walk by faith, not by sight." This little phrase is a reminder that as we encounter life's issues, we have a guide to help us which is not found through the use of our physical senses but our spiritual ones. In the parables of Mark found in chapter four we have two "sort of" guides to help in our search for what is called the kingdom or reign of God in Mark's gospel. We often look at these parable seeking to find a blueprint or map so we can understand precisely what he meant by the kingdom, reign, rule, realm or empire of God. All of these are equally acceptable translations of the Greek word used in the text. But what we get instead are oblique and even startling "sorta-like stories". These parables as found in Mark are actually a little bit tricky and a little bit mysterious because of a subtle difference in their structure as they are found in Matthew and Luke. In Mark the text for the first parable reads: the kingdom of God is as IF someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how." There is inherent in a seed parable something discontinuous, which is what Mark wants to get at with his parabolic comparison to the kingdom of God. A seed once planted is a mystery being revealed. It unfolds by its own operation in the soil. The one who planted it may sleep and rise, but a seed's work is automatic as the Greek word used suggests. The seed first sprouts, and grows until harvest and is a commonplace analogy for how divine transformation happens. The emergence of the seed's sequence represents to Mark, the emergence of God's kingdom on God's timetable, not yours or mine. God's divine reign is thus apocalyptic, assured and on a divine timetable...like the growth of a seed. Be confident. Walk in faith. Jesus was at the same time proclaiming that this kingdom of God which he described as being one of peace and justice and freedom was also near...and maybe like most of us when we look around our world today we see what Rev. Dr. Richard Boyce calls this busted, broken world...we really wonder and have trouble seeing that kingdom's in-breaking...so perhaps, that is why Jesus told his disciples this parable. Jesus claimed that this realm of God was one of peace, freedom and justice. It was already becoming a reality through him. Many of his enemies looked around them and saw a lack of peace and freedom and justice and they rejected Jesus' message. In fact, some of them thought he was either crazy or demon-possessed, or maybe both. Maybe some of Jesus' own disciples may have had their own doubts so Jesus told them this parable. He was reminding them that when it comes to understanding how God's kingdom works, we're all in over our heads. We're clueless. The realm of peace and freedom and justice that Jesus was talking about is something that only God can create. Some may find ways that are more or less

effective at bringing people in. But from the Biblical standpoint, the only source of any lasting growth on this front is God. So what does this mean for us? Do we just stand back and wait and pray that God will do something? Well, in the first place I think it means that we have to begin by recognizing the simple fact that we are in over our heads. We're dealing with matters that are beyond our understanding and abilities. But I think it also means that we have to recognize that it's our job to keep on persevering in the planting and tending the gospel seeds of mercy and kindness and love. And that we keep on planting those seeds when we don't see any signs of something sprouting or growing much less bearing fruit. Because we are in over our heads, we have to recognize that we may never know what comes from any of the seeds we plant. But because they are gospel seeds, they will bear fruit—in their own time and in their own way. I think that this means we are not to judge by outward appearances, by size or any other measure we can see. This is especially true we are reminded when the choosing is done by our Lord and what and how God is acting in this world...it is rarely according to how human thoughts would predict or else the savior of the world would not have appeared in the world as an infant. I think that this...all of this means that we have to operate based on faith. Imagine that—operating on the basis of faith in the church...in this world. But there's faith, and then there's faith. And it seems that Jesus is calling us to approach our task in this world with a faith that cannot know the outcome—at least in the immediate time frame. Investing our lives in the church that seeks to bear witness to God's realm of peace and freedom and justice in this world requires us to step out in faith that what we are doing is the right thing and will eventually bear fruit—even if we may not see it. It means persevering in kindness and love, and looking beyond appearances. It means recognizing we are in over our heads, but we can trust God is working in and through us constantly. The second parable in our text today is again about a seed—the mustard seed—whose growth is also said to appear and spread “all of a sudden”. We usually lift up the quality of the smallness of the seed and how it grows to such a height that it can support the nests of birds of the air and provide shade, which are wonderful things to grow from small beginnings. We lift up the wonders of what “small” amounts of faith can do. But in the world of Mark, there is another attribute of the mustard seed which is being lifted up and which we often do not appreciate—the mustard seed had the ability to spread and take over a field. One small seed left to grow could take over an entire field. In Mark's world their context was one which would preclude hope for the future, for freedom from oppression from Rome. It was written close to the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE and the conflicts and dangers of the world these people lived in were ones of chaos and untethered traditional context...much of what they had depended on had disappeared and Rome's power seemed unchecked. In such an imperial context, the seed as a parable for the Kingdom of God and the coming of peace, freedom and justice seems oddly detached from reality and the people's chaos. But Rome fell. Christianity grew and spread despite persecution, perhaps because of it. Yet it seems that within these things, it is this image of God's hand always at work is the one which gives us hope...and that we find in it the seeds for this statement: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” In the text from 2nd Corinthians, in addition to speaking of waking not by sight but by faith, Paul asserts that through that walk of faith we are becoming “new creations”. Becoming “new creations” and walking by faith is not always an easy path...it means that we have to look beyond what is visible to our physical eyes when we look at what is being said by the loudest voices in our world...we have to look at

the agendas being proclaimed and “fact check” them against the teaching of our Lord...those teachings that Jesus proclaimed were the hallmarks of God’s reign...those signs we should look for to see if we were walking within the boundaries of God’s kingdom...signs of justice...of freedom and respect for all others who bear the image of the creator within...signs of love for one another...if we look for and find those things...we are walking with the faith and not blindly at all. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.