

“The Most Radical Revolution”

John 12:20-26 (NRSV)

Although I can't remember the title, I can still remember some parts of the sermon on this text which **the Rev. Dr. Ian Pitt-Watson** preached to a number of us in the Fuller Theological Seminary Doctor of Ministry preaching class in Pasadena, California over twenty years ago. Ian Pitt-Watson, now passed on, was trained in Scotland and had been a former associate pastor at St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh and a professor of “Practical Theology” – among which subjects they included preaching -- at Aberdeen University, as well as a chaplain to Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II. For the last ten years or so of his ministry he'd come to teach at this largest, world famous evangelical seminary in California. The sermon was so well prepared and so powerfully preached that my wife – who also happened to be present for that occasion – and I were moved to tears.

I cannot possibly hope to do as well today -- besides I do not have his soft, delightful Scottish burr -- but I will try to tell you some of the things he said.

What do you think was the greatest revolution in world history?

Some say the **American Revolution** of 1776 was certainly the most famous for North Americans. It changed the whole new world. One must admit also that the so-called “glorious” yet rather brutal **French Revolution** of 1789, espousing liberty, equality and fraternity, had an equally great impact, certainly in Europe. And then there were the **Russian Communist Revolution** of 1917 and the **Chinese Communist Revolution** of 1945, no less cataclysmic and determinative of massive change, even though they did not achieve many of the hopes and dreams of their originators.

Yet perhaps **the greatest, most radical revolution** in the history of the world occurred many more years earlier. Some time, somewhere in the mists of time and the dawn of human history, probably **about 10,000 years ago**, a woman – yes, it was most likely a woman – **put some seed into the ground, instead of reserving it with the others** she'd gathered, kept and cooked for her family's sustenance. She put the seed into the ground and watched it grow. Amazingly, she discovered that this way she could harvest many more grains of seed than she had ever seemingly “wasted” in her so called “folly” – at least that's what her community might have called it -- of burying them in the darkness of the black earth.

Thus was begun **the radical revolution of tilling the soil.**

Archaeologists tell us **crop-sowing and grain-grinding** first occurred on the plains of Abu Hureyra (modern Syria), on the Nile River floodplain of North Africa (modern Egypt) and in the “fertile crescent” between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers of Mesopotamia (modern Iraq and Iran) about 10, 000 BC. The grains used probably included the likes of wheat, barley, flax, lentil and chickpea. By 8500 BC such rudimentary agriculture became more widespread and by 5500 BC it became systematic and organized. Intriguingly enough, agriculture only came to northwest Europe in 4800 BC.

But **the spontaneous cultivation of new agricultural crops** seems to have happened again and again in human history. Rice was first cultivated in China in 5000 BC; potatoes, in South America, in 5000 BC, and the simplest maize plant, the precursor of corn, in the Meso-Americas, in 3500 BC.

Just about 2000 years ago, **Jesus identified his own ministry** and the coming of the kingdom of God **with the key to this agricultural revolution.** “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (Jn. 12:24).

Although Jesus was derogatorily known as “the carpenter’s son” (Mk. 6:3; Matt. 13:55), it is interesting to me **his most compelling metaphors** were not those of building with wood but, instead, of **watching things grow.** Jesus was an astute observer and obvious lover of the soil and the plants that grew up in it even within the harsh climate and desolation of “the wilderness” of Judea. Witness only his famous, memorable Sermon on the Mount phrase, “Consider the lilies of the field ...” (Matt. 6:28; Lk. 12:27). As well as being aware of carpentry, our Lord and Saviour, must have been somewhat of an amateur gardener. Enjoying gardening myself, I like that.

1. Jesus was well aware of **the natural principles of growth.**

“Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (Jn. 12:24).

Seeds can fall into the soil either by accident or design; it doesn’t really matter, how they get there, but careful cultivation can raise a better crop.

We know that Jesus knew about these kind of things because of **the parables he taught**, preeminently, “The Parable of the Sower” -- or what I like to call “The Parable of the Soils and the Seeds” -- which is recorded in all three of the synoptic – or similar -- gospels (Mk. 4:1-9; Matt. 13:1-9; and Lk. 8:4-8). Here, as most of us know, seed can fall on bad ground and good ground. Hard, well-trodden paths and rocky soil can be impervious to the seed. Pesky birds can carry it away. The sun can scorch it. In those conditions it’s hard for seed to take deep root. Also, thorns and other weeds can choke the seed out. So, too, says Jesus, as he interprets this parable for his disciples, the soil of our lives can be inhospitable to the gospel’s seed, various things in our lives can crowd the successful growth of the seed out, or seed finds a welcoming place that gives abundant growth (Mk. 4:13-20; Matt. 13:18-23; and Lk. 8:11-15).

Jesus tells his disciples they have been “given **the secret of the kingdom**” (Mk. 4:11a; Matt. 13:11a; and Lk. 8:10a). What do you think this secret might be? I asked my Bible study class this question this last Thursday as we have been studying “The Parable of the Sower” in Mark’s Gospel these last few weeks. The answer is revealed in “**The Parable of the Seed Growing Secretly**” -- only preserved in Mark’s Gospel. It’s very short. I will give it to you in the NIV:

He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. **All by itself the soil produces grain** – first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come (Mk. 4:26-29).

Most of us know good growth requires good soil, good fertilizer, and sufficient sunlight, warmth and water; but, then almost miraculously, **the seed grows “all by itself.”** Not quite, of course, as the apostle Paul, also a bit of a gardener himself, wrote, **it might be we who plant and water, but it is actually “only God who gives the growth”** (1 Cor. 3:7b). **This is the secret of the kingdom:** we may manage the garden and adjust some of the ingredients, but **it is God who ultimately gives the growth.** Jesus knew that and he wanted his followers to know it as well.

So he tells **a couple of other parables about growing things**, like “The Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds” (Matt. 13:24-43), where, paradoxically, he suggest leaving the weeds to grow with the wheat until the final harvest; and “The Parable of the Mustard Seed” (Mk. 4:30-32; Matt. 13:31-32; and Lk. 13:18-19), where he suggests even a small seed can grow into a large tree.

Jesus understood **the natural principles of how things grow** – and that, indeed, God was behind and in it all -- and he wanted his followers to understand what things need to be done to assist in God’s growth process and what things must not be done, that might hinder God’s growth process.

Christian A. Schwarz, in his book called Natural Church Development (1998), has tapped into the understanding of this growth process by outlining eight essential qualities of **a healthy, growing church**. He suggests when churches are healthy, they grow “all by themselves,” according to the same **“biotic” principles** by which healthy plants grow. One doesn’t need so much as to tinker with churches as to pay attention to what makes churches healthy or unhealthy. These include: providing **empowering leadership** -- leadership that enables others to participate according to their **gift-oriented ministry**; encouraging **passionate spirituality** – where people are turned on by study of the Scriptures and by prayer; **functional structures** – where the way a church is organized makes for mutual, “symbiotic” growth, one affecting another, spurring each other on to healthy excellence; **inspiring worship services** – where people come away having been impacted by Almighty God; **holistic small groups** -- where people encourage and bless and care for one another; **need-oriented evangelism** – where people connect with others at the point of their need; and, **loving relationships** – where people connect with each other in deeply loving and satisfying ways. Growth is not so much what we do as what God does but, when all the right things are in place, growth happens.

Jesus was well aware of the natural principles of growth and so must we be.

2. Jesus was also well aware of **the spiritual principles of growth**.

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.
(Jn 12:24)

Of course, in referring to this seed that “dies,” he was first and foremost referring to his own voluntary sacrifice and death upon the cross for our salvation.

When you hold a kernel of wheat in your hand, you cannot see what is in it. Quite literally each grain – if it is a healthy grain -- contains within itself a large number of similar offspring. In planting season a grain is cast forth into the black earth as in a tomb. Then it **“dies” for a while**, and it is set forth from its encasement, and **it becomes a resurrection plant**, and its many grains are resurrection fruit! Jesus was telling the crowd he would fulfil his ministry by dying on the cross and thereby reproducing his life in countless others.

Our Lord expands that principle to include us in verse 25 and following:

Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. (Jn. 12:25-26a)

Our Lord said that the one who loves his/her life destroys it, while the one who hates his/her life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Was he saying we should cultivate a hatred of life? Of course not, he himself evidently enjoyed his life in this world as much as anyone of us do. But he was telling us that we need to follow his cue, and die to ourselves, that we only find life when we find ways of losing it, or at least of losing ourselves in something more than gratifying ourselves and our own needs.

Ian Pitt-Watson said that when he came to North America and especially southern California in the mid 1970s, he discovered that the dominant idea among Christians was that **“to be Christian was to ‘be nice.’”**

Jesus had something more than that in mind. To “be Christian” means to be prepared to let go of your life – to disown the imperious authority of your selfish ego, to give up your own self-concern, to sacrifice instant gratification for later, long-term effect and for present healthy, personal spiritual growth. In a comparative passage to this, in the three other gospels, Jesus put it more positively:

If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and

whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life [lose his own soul, KJV]? For what can a man give in return for his life? (Mk. 8:34-37; cf. Matt. 16:24-26; Lk. 9:23-25)

Whether in this world or in the world to come, our potential is never reached except through death to sin and denial of self.

Whatever we want to become (God willing) musically, athletically, academically, or whatever, a kind of death is the key. After finishing a brilliant concert, the renowned Ukrainian pianist, **Jan Paderewski**, was told by an admiring woman, "Sir, you are a genius," to which he responded, "Madam, before I was a genius, I was a drudge." His brilliance came through death – that is hard work and self-denial. The famous American runner, **Jim Ryun**, from Kansas who later became a successful politician, set a world record when he was eighteen years old, said this about his training, "I would run until I felt I couldn't take another step, then I would run until I felt my lungs were going to burst. When I came to that state, then I would run until I thought I was going to pass out. When I did this, I was making progress." The same principle is true in academics. It is also true in marriage, as well. An eminent English pastor, **H. P. Lidden**, preaching on Palm Sunday 100 years ago, said, "The errors and miseries of the world are purged with blood: everywhere in the great passages of human history we are on the track of sacrifice; and sacrifice, meet it where you may, is a moral power of incalculable force" (Passiontide Sermons, 1903, p. 105).

The **spiritual life** is governed by similar paradoxes. "[God's] power is made perfect in [our] weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). Do we want to know something about the riches of the kingdom of God? We must be willing to become "poor in spirit" (Matt. 5:3). Do we want to be first? Then we must be willing to be last (Mk. 10:31; Matt. 19:30; 20:16; Lk. 13:30). "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God that he may lift you up in due time" said Peter (1 Pe. 5:6). If we want to rule, we have to serve (Jn. 12:26). If we want to live, we have to die.

This is **the radical spiritual revolution** Jesus had in mind. This is what it means to "repent and believe the gospel" (Mk. 1:15; Matt. 4:17).

This is the spiritual meaning of what it means to put some seed into the ground. Instead of getting immediate results, say by taking, grinding, cooking and eating the seed today, one puts it into the ground, trusting for a later, hopefully much richer, more abundant harvest. And instead of looking after your own, selfish immediate needs, you might actually be looking after the needs of others.

Admittedly, this is not what most people, who are captured by the current self-focussed self-absorbed temper of these times, consider to be among the values that might be valued. But it is a Christian value.

This is the thing that drives Christians to their knees in humble **self-reflection** and **self-abnegation**.

This is also the thing that drives us to **the Christian “celebration” of such inward spiritual disciplines** as meditation, prayer, fasting and Bible study, **such outward spiritual disciplines** as the practice of simplicity, solitude, submission and various kinds of service, and **such corporate spiritual disciplines** as making confession, practicing sabbath, attending public worship, and seeking out spiritual guidance. Interestingly, I am glad our young people are currently considering these disciplines as they study **Richard Foster’s** excellent book, Celebration of Discipline (1978).

This can be a good Lenten discipline.

This is the way of Jesus Christ, and it is also the way of the Christian life.

This is the most radical revolution in which anyone can take part.

“I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed” (Jn. 12:24 NIV). Unless there is death, the vast potential and infinite possibilities inside us will not be released. We will shrivel and remain alone. **We must die to self.** That is the most radical revolution. Those who are beginning the Christian life or who are reawakening to their spiritual potential have learned that they live by dying.

Let the seed be sown into your own heart. Be the good soil. And allow God to engender whatever growth is good for you and for the people whose lives may come into contact with yours.

Amen

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