

ON THE GROWING EDGE
3) Grounded in the Present
Matthew 13: 31-32

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In our current series of messages, we are thinking about what it means to live “on the growing edge” of life. We are mindful that this is a choice that will be made for us if we do not choose to make it for ourselves. Organizations and institutions that do not consciously and continually choose to live on the growing edge will soon find themselves living comfortable lives in the declining middle of mediocrity and convenience. They will, inevitably, lose their edge and with it, a shared vision that inspires them to build a better future.

In thinking about what it means to live on the growing edge, we are using the parable of the mustard seed to remind us that the emerging reign of God (Kingdom of Heaven) often becomes known to us after the fact—that is after the seed has been planted and watered and tended over time. Jesus suggests as much when he reminds his listeners that the smallest of seeds can become, by the grace of God, the largest of shrubs—so large that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.

Last week, you may recall, we directed our attention to the seeds that were sown by the founders and early members of our congregation. Beginning in a funeral home on Front Street, 33 adult members and their children began sowing the seeds of a new congregation. Fifty eight years later, those seeds have grown, in ways that no one could have imagined, into our present campus and the many ministries that we provide.

This morning, our focus shifts from our past to our present. While we remain rooted in our past, we are also, grounded in our present as we tend the plants that have grown up from seeds that have been sown over the years.

While it is difficult to conceptualize all of the ministries that we are currently providing, this graphic will provide in a picture what a thousand words would have trouble saying.

As you can see, the “tree” of our ministry is one that branches out into many different areas of life and living. Its reach extends from the network of our internal ministries—ministries within our community of faith—to the external ministries—ministries featuring the witness of advocacy, justice, love and service to the world beyond our doors.

This morning, I would like to take a moment to trace the cycle of a seed that was planted just ten years ago. Ironically, this seed was planted in the wake of the natural catastrophe that was known as Hurricane Katrina. On August 29th, the ravaging wind and waves of Katrina came ashore along the Gulf Coast. It would prove to be one of the deadliest hurricanes in our history with 1,245 people losing their lives. It has been estimated that there was 108 billion dollars of property damage—to say nothing of the emotional havoc that this storm created.

In the stunning aftermath of Katrina, you may recall that there was a lot of blaming taking place with fingers being pointed and charges and counter charges made. But that was not going to address the problem of how the beleaguered people of the Gulf Coast could begin the long process of digging out from the rubble and rebuilding their lives. It was at that time that UMCOR, the United Methodist Committee on Relief, sprang into action. Having trained themselves to respond quickly and effectively in situations such as this, they quickly organized a response that included various work teams from various congregations from around the United States. Our congregation was, of course, one of those congregations that decided to roll up their sleeves and serve.

We responded not only by sending one work team to the Gulf Coast, but multiple work teams, both youth and adults, over the span of several years. Not only did we send teams, but we raised money—including some \$30,000 to assist a project that included building the framework for new housing in our parking lot and then shipping it to Macomb, Mississippi for actual construction.

Out of this tragedy came a generous response of love and compassion and service. Time and again, those who returned from one of these Gulf Coast trips, made it clear that they had benefitted from this work far more than those whose homes they helped to rebuild. They had discovered the blessing of giving, the true joy of losing themselves and indeed, giving themselves away for the sake of others.

And that discovery, planted the seeds that would, in many respects, change our church and the direction that we would take. One of those seeds began to grow in the life of Warren McGuffin. Inspired and moved by his many trips to the Gulf Coast, Warren began to understand his life and his faith very differently. On January 12, 2010, an earthquake rocked Haiti, inflicting tremendous damage.

Warren's Gulf Coast experience had prepared for what was to become the next chapter of his life. As many of you will recall, Warren organized a team from our congregation that helped the Haitian people dig out from the rubble and that, of course, was needed and necessary work.

But, by this point, Warren understood that there was more—so much more that was needed. And so it was that overtime and additional trips to Haiti, the seed of Warren's faith took root and began to grow. Developing a connection with the people of Thomas, Warren began to cultivate his dream of beginning a long term commitment to not only help these people dig out from the earthquake, but to help them create a sustainable life, one that would include the benefits of a feeding program, educational opportunities, improved sanitary conditions—including water purifiers and the wonders of solar powered electricity.

Today, the seed of this idea has become a young and vibrant plant that continues to grow and will continue to grow—in spite of recent political unrest and violence. Too many

people have been helped, too many people have found hope to allow this dream to be derailed.

And this saga of hope represents just one of the seeds that was planted in our congregation in the aftermath of Katrina. Many others seeds have likewise, taken root and begun to grow upward in significant ways. Our Mission Committee, under the excellent leadership of Paul Kuelz, has organized an ongoing commitment to mission and outreach that continually makes opportunities to serve available to our congregation.

From the Med Share Program to the Food Bank to Habitat for Humanity to Trinity Center, we are serious about our service.

We are a people, you see, who understand that each one of us has a calling, whether that calling is local, national or international in nature. The **location** is secondary. It is our **vocation** that is primary—our calling to reach out, wherever we are, in love, compassion and service to others.

As Paul mentioned, recently, at our Administrative Board meeting, we want to be known as the “Church that serves...the church that reaches out...the church that is in ministry “with and not to” others. And I would like to suggest that by the grace of God and the generous and self-less commitment of many of you, this desire is becoming a reality. “Service in everything that we do” is more than merely a slogan, it is the vision that inspires and challenges us to keep tending the seeds that are growing into large shrubs and trees that provide nesting places—places of nurture and support—for many.

This commitment to be in service to others, of course, represents only one dimension of our current ministry. There are other seeds that have been sown and are growing up into vital plants that offer nurture and support to our **children and our youth**.

There are seeds that have been planted in our commitment to the ministry of **small groups** and the realization that if our faith experience is to come alive and be shared in community with others. It is a powerful thing to witness the transformation that takes place in individual lives when there is the opportunity to think and talk together about the meaning and purpose of our faith.

There are seeds that were planted and took root in the **Neighborhood Network**...seeds that today, have sprouted into the **Kindness Korps** and its ministry to those who have everyday needs. Thanks to their efforts, acts of kindness have become commonplace within our faith community.

The list goes on, but I won't overwhelm you with all of the details. Suffice it to say that, by the grace of God as expressed through the ministries that many of you participate in, we are firmly grounded in the present. From the tiny seeds that have been planted, we have become a tree that provides nesting places, place of nurture and support for many—both within our membership and within the community of which we are a part.

That is something to truly celebrate! We ought to feel good about what we have been able to do. And we ought to be optimistic about what we will be able to do in our future. But this doesn't mean that we should kick back and feel as if we have somehow arrived at our destination. It doesn't mean that we have reason to rest on our laurels.

It simply means that we are on the way—moving forward, one step at a time—building on the legacy that we have inherited. It simply means that we are choosing to live “on the growing edge” and that is a pretty exciting place to be.

In closing, this morning, I would like to invite you to take some time this week to reflect upon the vital ministries that we currently are able to provide. Think about this tree of ministry.

Think, if you will, about the difference that we are making in the life of this community...

Think about the lives that have been changed...

The support that has been offered...

The encouragement and hope provided.

Think about the many ways in which the seeds of our ministries have grown up and into the shrubs and trees of God's emerging kingdom. And then, think, if you will about the financial commitment you will make in the year ahead to ensure that these ministries of compassion and love and service not only continue, but continue to leaf out and grow.

While some may be reluctant to talk about money in the Church, it is a subject that we simply cannot ignore or avoid. To put it simply, money matters. It matters to us as individuals because it is a reflection of the purpose and priority of our lives.

“Where your treasure is,” said Jesus, “there will your heart be also.”

And yes, it matters to us as a community of faith because the investment of our money makes ministry possible. It enables us to pool our resources and our talents so that together, we can accomplish something far greater than what we can accomplish by ourselves.

Someone recently reminded me of a unique characteristic of the Redwood Tree.

As you know, the Redwood is a giant among trees, often growing to heights of 350 feet. But here is the amazing thing. The roots of the Redwood are only about ten feet deep. You would think that that differential of tree height and root depth would make it quite likely that the tree would simply fall over. But that is not what happens because the Redwood spreads out its roots, searching for other Redwood trees.

When that connection is made, the roots then intertwine underground, serving as a support system in which each tree holds each other tree in the grove upright and strong.

This example serves, I believe, as a very timely analogy for those of us who share the “grove” that we know as the community of faith. It is within our community and our shared

root system that we find the strength to stand together, straight and tall, inviting the birds of the air to come and nest in our branches. Amen.