

DESCENDING INTO GREATNESS

“When the Kingdom Doesn’t Come”

Since I first mentioned it back at the beginning of December, some of you have asked about how Christa and I have been doing at our house-hunting adventure. Well, for those who care, you’ll be happy to know that, in the last two weeks Christa and I sold our house and put the finishing touches on a deal for house in a neighbourhood just off of Glenridge. It was a house that first piqued our interest months ago when, on a whim, we visited it during an open house. It was way out of our price range and dated, but it had potential: three bedrooms upstairs, including a large master bed with ensuite; hardwood floors virtually throughout the house; two large sitting rooms on the main floor, each with its own fireplace; and a three-season sunroom in the back.

When the house suddenly tumbled into our bracket we went back for another peek and discovered one feature we hadn’t noticed the first time, an enormous crack in the foundation, big enough to have already caused two deals to fall apart at home inspection. So we dug deeper. On that second visit with our agent, Christa and I brought both of our fathers to assess the damage. We read through the vendor’s structural engineering report, and when my dad realized that he had personally known the engineer for years he called him up and personally dug deeper. On the third visit, we brought my brother and his wife who have extensive renovation experience and a family friend who has been building homes for decades to investigate still further. It was only after everybody had agreed that the house was sturdy that we decided to move ahead. The last thing that we wanted to do was impulsively pull the trigger and commit to a house, only to find out after the fact that, in the end, we weren’t really getting what we thought we were getting.

I imagine that there were times when Jesus’ disciples wondered whether, in committing their lives to following in Jesus’ footsteps, they weren’t really getting what they thought they were getting. Think about it. Along comes this Jesus, trumpeted by John the Baptist as the Messiah sent by God to usher in a new era on earth, an era of grace where the Holy Spirit would powerfully work in people’s lives, and for a time, in Jesus’ ministry, you could

see God doing something new in the world, pushing back the darkness and reclaiming the world for good. You heard it in Jesus' hope-giving message of forgiveness and second chances for sinners. You saw it in Jesus' joy-giving freedom, rescuing people from the evil of oppression and injustice; in the way he restored broken people to life-giving wholeness. Something new was happening through Jesus, something he said was going to explode with growth and touch lives all over the world.

Mark 4:30-32 [NIV] — Again [Jesus] said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade.”

The seed Jesus was probably thinking about was the seed of the black mustard plant, grown all over the Mediterranean world for its oil and for its use as a condiment. Of the annuals planted in Mediterranean gardens each year, the black mustard seed was the smallest. It was barely a millimeter in diameter and it hardly weighed one and a half milligrams each. Yet, in good conditions, by the end of the season, it would have grown to a height of thirteen feet, by far the largest of the garden plants, a small tree in which birds could find shelter for their nests.

Like the tiny mustard seed, God's redeeming presence in the world started with just one man in one place, with Jesus and his band of merry men in backwater Israel, but in time it would explode into a worldwide revolution of grace. What started as one man offering forgiveness and life change would end as millions, even billions, of people receiving second chances with God. What started as one man healing sick people one at a time would end as a global movement to restore broken people everywhere to wholeness. What started as one man overthrowing the forces of evil would end as a universal church fighting injustice and oppression wherever it is found and setting people free. This was the vision the disciples caught, the one to which they gave their lives: following in Jesus' footsteps to spread God's influence across the globe.

The problem was that for the most part, the kingdom didn't seem to be coming the way that Jesus said it would. Sure, there were crowds. People who swarmed Jesus, thrilled by his preaching or hopeful for healing but it always seemed so superficial. The buzz around Galilee always felt more like faddishness than faithfulness. Few

people, if any, ever seemed to graduate from audience to apprentice. Some people seemed more puzzled by Jesus than anything else. There were some who just couldn't make heads or tails of why Jesus did what he did, marching to his own spiritual drum and refusing to observe the religious rituals and rules of the day. There were skeptics, even Jesus' own family, who were convinced that he was out of his mind and had resolved to rescue him from his delusions of grandeur. Some went so far as to accuse Jesus of blasphemy, suggesting that he was in cahoots with God's enemy, Satan and working at cross purposes with God. There was even a group of religious leaders secretly plotting to end his life, determined to shut him up once and for all. Truth be told, some of Jesus' disciples were starting to ask questions. If Jesus was who he said he was why weren't people everywhere flocking to his side? It just didn't make any sense to them. Why was it that after witnessing his miracles, people still wouldn't commit and after hearing his sermons, people still wouldn't believe?

Some of us know exactly where the disciples are coming from. Some, in the enthusiasm of starting a new spiritual journey of following in Jesus' footsteps, have been excitedly talking about it with your family only to be dismayed by the surprisingly cool reception you've gotten. Others have passionately shared with coworkers about the difference that Jesus makes only to be shocked by the unexpectedly hostile reactions. Some are wavering with discouragement after decades of praying for friends who seem to have somehow developed immunity to the good news about Jesus. Still others have thrown in the towel because the interest their neighbours used to show has apparently flamed out for no good reason. In the frustration, you've started to wonder why those you care about most couldn't care less about Jesus. You've started to wonder why Jesus, who's made all the difference to you, would make so little difference to them. More than that, you're starting to wonder what to do when the kingdom doesn't seem to be coming.

What's worse is that Jesus seems to acknowledge the fact that, when it comes to spiritual things, there are two kinds of people in the world: people who get it and people who don't.

Mark 4:10-12 [NIV] — When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, ‘...they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!’”

These verses are a little bit disconcerting. Jesus sounds like he's saying that when it comes to spiritual things there are some people who just get it at a deep heart level and others who just don't get it at all, who will permanently be on the outside looking in, excluded from the influence of God's powerful presence, who will never really see the significance of what they see in the church or what they hear about God, who would never truly experience God's forgiveness. The question is, why? What's the difference between people who respond to the good news about Jesus and those who don't? What prevents some people from getting it with God?

In Mark 4, Jesus answers this question by telling a story about a day in the life of a first-century farmer. The farmer goes out one morning to sow the seed for his crop. As he scattered his seed, flinging it by hand around his field, portions of it fell on very different types of soil. Some of it fell along a trampled-down path that ran along the edge of the field and because it lay so close to the path, the seed never got ploughed into the ground. Instead, just sitting there on the surface of the soil, it was gobbled up by some birds that hovered over the field. Some of the seed landed in part of the field where a very thin layer of topsoil disguised a very thick bed of limestone underneath. The seed was ploughed into the soil and sprang up immediately, but there wasn't enough soil there to grow proper roots, so the plant withered under the scorching sun. A third batch of seed fell among a thick patch of weeds. Forced into competition for light, water and nourishment, in time the thorns choked out the plant and kept it from actually producing any grain. Finally, Jesus said, there were other seeds, all of which fell where the soil was rich and dark, producing bumper crops, multiplying thirty, some sixty, some even a hundred times over! When the disciples asked him to elaborate, this was Jesus' explanation of the story.

Mark 4:14-15 [NIV] — The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them.

Some people, Jesus said, are like the path that didn't allow the seed to sink in. Their hearts have just grown hard to influence of God. They engage in spiritual conversations in a disarmingly casual and disinterested way, if at all. It's as though, in deep discussions, they are rubber and you are glue and whatever you say bounces off him and sticks to you. Spiritual dialogue disappears faster than a bowl of peanut M&Ms at my house. It's gone before it

ever really had a chance to make a difference. You know someone like that, someone like Chris' friend Keith in the drama, someone like a neighbour I had once. In five years of living side by side, we spoke about spiritual things only once, barely long enough for him to tell me why he hated the church and believed that Jesus was utterly irrelevant to his life. It was the only time I was ever been able to get past his tough exterior. Jesus says that only the work of God's enemy, the devil, can produce a heart that hard towards God. For some people, the kingdom just doesn't come because Satan has snuffed out whatever spiritual flame may have once burned.

But, Jesus said, not everyone is as hard-hearted and closed as my neighbour.

Mark 4:16-17 [NIV] — Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.

Other people are less like Chris' coworker, Keith and more like his neighbour Shannon. Initially, Shannon was extremely open to hearing about Jesus, even accepting his forgiveness, at first growing quickly as an apprentice. But when the sun started beating down and things start heating up with her family, things began to change. Her parents felt betrayed by the way she so eagerly abandoned whatever religious or irreligious upbringing she had received to follow Jesus instead. Her husband started in with the jokes about Jesus freaks, perhaps out of the sadness of watching the woman he loved suddenly change without warning. Her buddies probably dug in as well, feeling betrayed by how the old Shannon just disappeared. Whatever it was, in the end it was too much and Shannon just threw in the towel. She got tripped up by all the trouble her faith was causing in her relationships, so she packed it in and the kingdom never really came.

According to Jesus, there is still another reason why the kingdom doesn't ever seem to come in some

people's lives, one that has more to do with internal, rather than external, pressure.

Mark 4:16-17 [NIV] — Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.

Some people aren't like Keith or like Shannon. They're more like Jared, the guy from Chris' softball team.

Like Shannon, at first it really seemed like Jared was into the journey of spiritual discovery with Jesus. He was

keenly interested in spiritual discussions. He started coming to church and really loved it. The seed had hit the ground and real spiritual growth was beginning to take place in his life, until Ange, his ex, showed up. Ange wasn't really as into this whole "churchy thing" that Jared was so excited about. Because she wasn't into Jesus, Jared suddenly found himself on the horns of a dilemma. He was forced to choose between the two relationships that mattered most to him, with the woman he loved or with the God he was just getting to know and when push came to shove, Jared wanted a wife more than a saviour. The hope of marriage choked out the chance for a relationship with Jesus. Others are distracted less by marriage and more by the pursuit of power, popularity, prestige, pleasure, money, drink, career or kids. God gets choked out by the sparkles of the world and never has a chance to come.

At the end of the day, when people don't respond to the good news about Jesus, it's not because there's a problem with the seed, the message and it's not because there's a problem with how it was sown, with the messenger. When people don't respond to the good news about Jesus, it's because there is a problem with the soil, with the condition of their heart. Some people don't really hear the message because their hearts have become hardened and closed towards God. Others hear the message and respond, but quickly throw in the towel because of social pressure to give up on Christ. Still others hear the message and respond, but fail to grow as a follower of Jesus because they are too distracted by the enticements of life, because they prioritize creature comforts over Christ. Each of these kinds of people gets out of the gospel exactly what they put into it. They are content to settle for life the way it is, to give in to the pressures and drop out of the race and so the kingdom never has a chance to come in their life.

In Jesus' story, the difference between the seeds that grew and the seeds that didn't was the condition of the soil, the condition of their hearts. Look at Mark 4:10-11 again.

Mark 4:10-11a [NIV] — When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you."

The people who really respond to the good news about Jesus and engage in a life of following in his footsteps for the long haul are those who jumped at the first opportunity to get Jesus alone and ask him more about

what he was teaching, those who pestered him to go deeper, so that they could really understand the good news. It was the ones who actively, persistently engaged in the process of seeking, who really found answers to the questions of life. Jesus' point is that how you listen to what God is teaching determines how you respond. The kingdom of God comes wherever people are seeking persistently. This is what Jesus means in Mark 4:24-25.

Mark 4:24-25 [TNIV] — “Consider carefully what you hear,” he continued. “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. Those who have will be given more; as for those who do not have, even what they have will be taken from them.”

Jesus says that the influence of God takes root in every life where people actively engage and focus on learning about Christ. A person's experience of the difference that Jesus makes is directly proportional to the personal investment they make in understanding and responding to his teaching. The more time, effort and energy people invest in seeking to understand a new life with Jesus, the greater the return they will get from it. Truth be told, Jesus says, the return is actually disproportionately large. They get more out of it than they put into it. But, the person who is content to hear but to not understand—the person who has hardened their heart towards God, the one who withers under the heat of persecution, the one who is distracted by the glitter of life in the world—they'll lose even what little spiritual vitality they have. They'll experience none of the newness of life, none of the growth, none of the fruit of living a life with Jesus.

So the question is this morning, how has your hearing been lately? How have you been doing at passionately pursuing a life with God? Have you been hard-hearted towards him, closed minded, trying to push him away or keep his word from sinking in? Have you been intimidated by others lately, pressured by friends or family to throw in the towel, hounded by classmates or teammates to give up on following Christ? Have you been distracted lately? Has the world caught your eye? What else besides Christ have you been seeking lately, a relationship? A career? A promotion? The almighty dollar? The Jones? Pleasure? Or have you been seeking? Have you been pursuing God, longing to go deeper with him, to drink up more of his life, to experience more of his presence and power? How can you listen better? God's kingdom comes wherever people are seeking persistently.

But, what do you do when you are the one sharing Christ people for whom the kingdom just doesn't seem to

be coming? What do you do when you're out there throwing the seed of the good news about Jesus and it all seems to be landing on the path, or in the rocks or among the thorns? You just keep throwing because you never know what's going on under the surface.

Mark 4:26-29 [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."

Throughout church history, the parable about the soils has most often, even if incorrectly, been called "The Parable of the Sower." If that is true, then I think this one should be called "The Parable of the Seed that certainly doesn't need the Help from the Idiot that Sowed it." It's a story about a man who also sows his seed (which still stands for the good news about Jesus) onto the ground (which still stands for hearts of the hearers). But, from the moment the seed hits the ground, the farmer contributes absolutely nothing towards its growth. In fact, the farmer is completely irrelevant to the growth of the seed in the soil. Night after night, day after day, the farmer simply goes about the regular rhythms of life, sleeping and getting out of bed, and all of it contributes not one lick to the successful germination of the seed. The man doesn't even really understand how the whole process works. To him, the seed just grows automatically. It appears to grow all by itself because, in truth, there is nothing that the farmer does to germinate a seed. Successful germination is a function of the combination of good quality soil and the power latent within the seed itself. At the end of the day, all the farmer really has to do is sit around and wait for the harvest. All he has to do is to just be available when it comes time to bring in the crops.

Jesus' point is that our responsibility in sharing the message about forgiveness and new life through him is exactly the same as that of the farmer. We're required to continuously throw the seed, to spread the good news about Jesus, and to be available to bring in the harvest at the right time, to help somebody choose to devote their life to following Jesus whenever they're ready. That's it. The real work is really done by the soil and the seed, by the hearer and the good news itself. The soil, the hearer, is responsible to keep itself dark, rich, and soft, to always be the kind of environment in which a seed, the gospel, can germinate because the seed, the gospel itself, has the power

all on its own to produce growth. It doesn't need to be persuaded, convinced, coaxed or coerced to grow, when give the right environment. It just grows all by itself. That's why the harvest comes wherever the soil is good. That's why spiritual growth emerges everywhere a person's heart is soft towards God. You don't have to add anything to it. You don't have to make it happen. You don't even have to understand how it works. You just keep sowing the seed and keep patiently waiting for the growth to come in its time. That's why God's kingdom comes wherever people are sharing patiently. That's what Jesus has called us to do, the role that Jesus has called us to play. Jesus has called us to be farmer, day after day just throwing the seed without ever giving up and just leave the rest up to God.

It's the exact lesson that Brian Garden, our Sunday morning lighting guru was forced to learn lately in his relationship with his mom. I hope that you are encouraged by their story.
[Brian/Debbie Garden Video Testimony]

In Mark 4, Jesus summed it all up, using yet one more analogy from life.
Mark 4:21-23 [TNIV] — He said to them, “Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear.”

For many of us, there was once a day when someone was investing in us, when someone was faithfully throwing the seed in our lives, uncertain of how it would be received, unaware of what God was doing beneath the surface, unwavering in their devotion to seeing us experience the power of the influence of Jesus Christ in our life, and undaunted as they waited to harvest the spiritual growth that God would bring to our lives. Then one day after days, months, years, even decades of seeking, we finally got it. That seed started to grow. The growth that had been slowly taking place beneath the surface the whole time, completely hidden from view finally broke through. In the words of Jesus, what had been hidden was finally disclosed. The spiritual growth that had been concealed was finally brought out into the open. After dozens of debates, hundreds of conversations, and thousands of hours, to mix metaphors, the light finally went on. We finally understood the good news about the forgiveness and new life that Jesus brings.

When the light finally comes on in your heart, it comes on so that you will let it shine for others. When God flicks on the light in our life, he doesn't do it so that we can hide it in a closet somewhere or cover it up with some dark lampshade. When God flicks on the light in your life, he does it so that you can light the way for somebody else, so that you can be a shining example of the grace of God in your life, so that you can light up the lives of others who desperately need to get out of the darkness and see the light of a new day in their life. For two thousand years God's kingdom has already been coming in our world. What started as that tiny mustard seed has been growing into an incredible worldwide movement, a revolution of grace where sinful people are finding forgiveness, broken people are finding wholeness, and oppressed people are finding justice. Jesus is inviting you to be a part of the adventure of watching God's kingdom come through the consistent sowing of the word in the conducive soil of the world.

PAGE 1

PAGE 11