

Prince Harry, Meghan Markle, Grace, Alice, Hayes and Jesus

Mark 4: 26-34

Sid Batts

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Were you caught up in the hoopla of the *Royal Wedding*? Twenty-nine million Americans tuned in and two billion people world-wide. Pretty impressive! It was a fairy tale played out with Prince Harry and American actress Meghan Markle. A prince marries his beloved in a magnificent cathedral surrounded by the choirs of angels. Together they parade through the streets in a horse-drawn carriage, waving to thousands of well-wishers. Full of pomp and circumstance it was... with a little drama inspired by the bride's dad: Would she choose him to walk her down the aisle after he had sold his story to the gossip industry? And there was drama created by the chatty television emcees who speculated about the all-important dress. I for one was more interested in the sermon than the dress but what do you expect from a preacher!

Okay, so people love weddings...which is part of the draw. And the reason, I think, is that weddings are joyful and hopeful. Weddings are times to celebrate and times to be optimistic. And in the midst of all the tragedy, darkness, lying, stealing, and cheating that goes on in the world, those two getting married represent this very important hope: that love *really does* conquer all...which is something to hold on to when you are this close to being a cynic. Right?

In the church, there are two occasions that spring forth with that kind of exuberant joy and hope: weddings, of course...And the other? Baptism!

There is such joy and hope surrounding a baptism... where our children are doused with the love of God while being symbolically claimed by God. The hope present among parents, family, and the church is palpable. As in a wedding, the future and all its hopes stand waiting for the couple — at a baptism, the future and all the hopes for our children, stand waiting.

Today that kind of hope surrounds Grace, Alice and Hayes (who was baptized in the *Rejoice* service.) But what are all these hopes about? What are we hoping for?

I think our hopes are articulated by Jesus in the parables we heard earlier.

We First Presbyterians have been reading the Gospel of Mark since Easter. If you look behind me on the sanctuary wall, you see the cross surrounded by symbols of the four gospels. And if you look closely at the symbol on the bottom left you will see a lion, representing Mark's gospel. That's because in Mark, Jesus, like a lion, roars into action; no genealogy, no birth story in Bethlehem, no mention of Mary and Joseph. Bam, there is John the Baptist baptizing Jesus, and before you know it, Jesus has roared into his ministry.

The pace is rapid. Jesus is a man of action, a super hero of sorts, the son of God who heals, confronts demons, performs miracles, who stops the wind and the waves. By the time we get to chapter four, Jesus slows just a bit to teach about the spiritual kingdom that is coming and has come...and he uses parables about the earth and its seeds to do so.

It's about dirt and seeds and the theme is growth.

Here is my paraphrase:

The spiritual kingdom is like seed thrown on a field by a man who then goes about his business and forgets about it. The seed sprouts and grows—he has no idea how it happens. The earth does it all without his help.

And, how do we visualize the spiritual kingdom? It is like a tiny mustard seed planted in the ground yet it grows to become one of the largest of all shrubs.

What is the thread here? Growth. Seeds that grow.

Okay, back to baptism. What is the hope that swirls around the baptism font each time we bring our children? I contend that all of our hopes for our children are about growth.

Are you with me? When we think about their future, we are hoping they will grow to be _____ what? Fill in the blank. I mean, each parent has a list of what kind of person we want our children to grow up to be. Athletic, kind, smart, compassionate, loving, respectful. I mean, most of those hopes are beyond Garrison Keilor's *Lake Wobegone* children... Where they are merely above average. Not the hope for *our* children!

And what does God want from God's children? That would be you and me, as well as Grace, Alice and Hayes. Listen to Jesus. Listen to the parable. What God wants is growth, a faith that grows and a life that grows into something.

II

Are you familiar with Carol Dweck? She is the Stanford psychologist whose research on how kids learn and succeed has made a huge impact on how parents and teachers understand learning. For thirty years, she has researched not only how kids learn, but how failure and success tie in, wondering how some kids seem to give up after failures and other kids just see those failures as jumping-off points.

During the course of Dweck's thirty-year work, there has been a lot of brain research. One of the interesting learnings has been that the brain is pliable and expansive.

So, Dweck has coined the term *Fixed Mindset* and *Growth Mindset* to demonstrate how people learn and succeed. The old school understanding was that intelligence (the brain) was a fixed commodity... that IQ or smartness was fixed and therefore un-improvable. But the science began to show differently. Instead, the mind is like talent; you can expand its ability by stretching it. However, if you believe or your parents believe or the teachers believe that the mind and talent are fixed, then kids who are smart or average don't work as hard because they believe that everything is fixed. When a child believes and understands that their mind and talent is expandable, and gets better with exercise and practice, then the results are amazingly different.

It's a fixed mindset verses a growth mindset. It is science, belief, attitude and effort.

And If we listen to Jesus, do you hear what he wants? He wants to create in us is a spiritual growth mindset. The seeds of faith grow in us, develop in us and in our children.

And if we listen to the gospel, it is not enough just to believe that we are loved by God... although we certainly are. And this is where we mainliners often miss it. We are great telling our kids that God loves them, that they are accepted. But read the gospels, listen to Jesus. Jesus expects more from us than merely accepting that we are loved, or as Evangelicals will often say, being saved.

Jesus expects more. Jesus expects us to grow...

To grow in those challenging spiritual things such as loving our enemies, Forgiving those who have wronged us,

Of giving sacrificially,

Of turning the other cheek rather than retaliating and getting even,

In refusing to gossip or slander someone's character.

That takes a spiritual growth mindset!

James Fowler, a theologian and social science PhD once did ground breaking work on the stages of faith. Taking a cue from giants Jean Piaget and Eric Erikson (and their theories of human development), Fowler spent years researching and developing his theory. He says that you and I go through a predictable series of stages when it comes to faith, with six stages in all. In certain stages we see God primarily as a friend; other stages are marked by sharp ideological boundaries; in other stages we become more accepting and less dogmatic... and so forth. The first two stages have to do with age and then the third stage takes hold during adolescence. After that we are able to continue to grow and develop... or we get stuck. Fowler says that many adults never get out of our adolescent stage of faith. Why? Because we stop seeing, stop learning and stop growing.

That is a fixed mindset in which we say – I'm saved or I'm loved. But it's a growth mindset that Jesus calls for.

III

Do you know who the hero is in these growth parables? The dirt. It's the dirt where the seeds grow.

So on this Father's Day, we are reminded of how important the role of parents is when it comes to the growth of our children. Parents are the dirt along with the church and what we want is for them not merely growth...but dirt to flourish.

You know what flourish means? To develop in a vigorous way, because of a favorable environment.

A favorable environment. Dirt, that's the family! That's the church!

I have probably told you this story but I love it because it says so much about how the hope of parents gets translated into action. It is a true story.

Andy is a forty-one-year-old father. His wife has played violin since childhood, his 'tween daughter also plays violin and his son, the viola. Now, Andy the dad plays the keyboard but has never played a stringed instrument in his life. But he could hear the music coming from his family trio and knew that his family was just one cello short of a string quartet.

So do you know what he did? At forty-one he started taking cello lessons. Every week he attended a cello lesson and made a promise to himself to practice one hour every day.

But Andy also knows of the research that says that to master pretty much anything, requires ten thousand hours of practice. In Andy's case, practicing at one hour a day, six days a week, and fifty weeks a year, comes out that he could good by the time he is seventy-four!

Now several years after starting cello lessons, his family is making music together as a string quartet.

So why does he do it? He knows he will never be really good at playing the cello and, he realizes that in ten years, his kids will be off to college.

This is what he says: "For all these lessons, all this money, all this time, all this vulnerability (of not being good at it), for what exactly? The best answer I can muster is that the goal of this is flourishing. I'm learning the cello to flourish as a father...and so that my family will flourish. I want my children to see me learning, growing, stretching, and disciplining's my body and my mind to be able to create something I could not create before. I want our family to create together, not just to consume together."

Now that's a dad who wants his family to flourish!

Strong families are the dirt in which their kids can flourish. And it's not just for the kids. A strong, spiritually healthy family is a place where everyone including parents can flourish.

IV

But the question for all parents goes back to our hopes. What do we want our kids to grow up to be?

The spiritual question may be, "Who do we want to shape the worldview of our children?" Television, the soccer leagues, social media, or a culture which teaches us to achieve more so we can consume more? Or do we want our kids to have a world view shaped by the values of Jesus, and the village which buys into the counter culture message that love is stronger than hate, that you make a living by what you get, but you make a life out of what you give.

If you ask me why a spiritual growth mindset is so important, this is my answer: because we are what we believe. If our faith is shallow, untested, seldom challenged or un-thought through, then we are incredibly vulnerable... to whatever and whoever comes along (whether it is drugs, the wrong crowd, a charismatic snake oil salesman or the temptation to go to the dark side); or worse perhaps, being vulnerable to falling into a spiritual black hole

of wishy-washy nothingness with no moral compass instead of a God who gives us spiritual strength when the difficult times come our way.

So on this day of hope we know what we are hoping for – Lets be the dirt!