

PLANTING SEEDS OF REDEMPTION

Matthew 13: 31-32: The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree; so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.

As Jesus hung on a cross between heaven and earth, he was heard to cry “It is finished.” As recorded in John 19, after Jesus uttered these three words, he “bowed his head and gave up his spirit.”

The meaning of these three words is obvious at one level. The physical life of Jesus was over.

But there is a much deeper meaning to these words. When his physical life ended and God resurrected him three days later, the redemption that Jesus came to earth to accomplish was finished.

That is almost impossible to believe when you look at the brokenness all around us. There are wars and conflicts all over the globe. Marginalized peoples are oppressed by dictators. Some children and spouses are ignored or abused. Ignorance increasingly gets passed off as “truth” in public life. Environmental degradation is increasing. And ugliness increasingly seems to replace beauty in popular culture.

In light of all this contrary evidence, how can Christians dare to declare that the redemption wrought by Jesus has been finished? That possibility can only be envisioned through the eyes of faith.

Theologians have a fancy name for this, “realized eschatology.” In terms that sound contradictory, the Kingdom of God is “here, but not yet.” I understand this to mean that the death and resurrection of Jesus has indeed “sealed the deal,” so to speak. The redemptive work of Christ is indeed finished. And the completeness of that redemption

will be seen in its fullness at the end times. But in the meantime, it is only possible to point to some partial glimpses of that full glory to come.

So, through the eyes of faith, I believe the day will come when there will be no more war, when swords will be beat into plowshares (Isaiah 2:4). The day will come when there will be no more conflict, when even the wolf shall live with the lamb (Isaiah 11:6). The day will come when all people will be free, released from the bonds of oppression and injustice. The day will come when broken family relationships will be healed. The day will come when truth will overcome ignorance. The day will come when our environment will be perfectly restored. The day will come when beauty will trump ugliness.

What a glorious day that will be. But, the big question, right now, for all of us who claim to be followers of Jesus, is what should we be doing, if anything, right now, in light of that future full redemption to come. Christians have responded with at least the following three strategies, the third of which I will recommend for your consideration.

Withdrawing

One common strategy is to withdraw: Those who hold this view believe that the world is so broken, that it is beyond human repair. Only God is big enough to fix things, and God will do that perfectly at the end of times.

So, according to this view, the most that Christians can do is model a better way, to create partial glimpses of the full redemption to come in their churches and other Christian communities.

There is an element of truth to this viewpoint. Christian communities ought to be modeling this better redemptive way in their churches and Christian communities. And, to the extent that we are not doing that, we need to pray for God's forgiveness.

But such modeling within our Christian communities is not meant to take us “out of the world.” Note carefully the prayer of Jesus as recorded in John 17:15: “I do not pray that you will take them out of the world,” praying rather that God would “keep them safe from the evil one.” And Jesus also taught that while we are in the world, we are called to be “the salt of the earth” and the “light of the world,” and that light is not to be hidden under a bushel, but we are to “let our light shine before others” (Matthew 5:13-16).

So, I propose that withdrawal from the world is not what Christians are called to.

Conquering

A second common strategy is to seek to conquer: Those who hold this view believe that since the biblical record tells us how things ought to be, what perfectly fulfilled redemption ought to look like, it is the task of Christians to impose Christian values on others, to coerce others into living according to the values of the kingdom of God.

As tempting as this option may sound, its fatal flaw is that the way that Jesus taught us to live is not the way of “coercion,” but, rather, the way of “love.” God chose to create human beings so that they are free to choose the “ways of God,” but for such freedom to be authentic, human beings must also be genuinely free to reject the “ways of God.”

So, I propose that conquering the world for Jesus is not what Christians are called to.

I propose for your consideration a third way for Christians to live in our world.

Planting Seeds of Redemption

This “better way” first came to me in August of 1988, one early morning when I got on highway 10 as I started driving east to go to my new job in Pennsylvania. Way off in the distance I could see the sun rising, barely a speck on the horizon. The thought occurred to me that in about six hours that little speck would be a bright ball of light over Orange

City. That little speck was an intimation of something marvelous to come. That moment was a special revelatory event for me. For at that moment, it occurred me that the kingdom of God is something like that. In our present broken world we can only see small specks, but these small glimpses of the Kingdom of God point us to the glory to come some day, when the kingdom of God will be fully present.

You see, the biblical teaching about the kingdom of God is that it is not something “static,” it is something that “grows.” Our text this morning likens that growth to a “gradually growing tree.” The parable of the Sower in Matthew 13 likens the kingdom of God to a “growing field of wheat.” The parable of the Yeast in Luke 13 likens the kingdom of God to “yeast spreading through rising dough.”

But let me focus on the image in our text of little mustard seeds that are planted and eventually grow into a giant tree. That image is the basis for my central claim this morning: ***Christians are called to plant seeds of redemption, one day at a time, as small intimations or glimpses of the full redemption to come, entrusting the harvest to God.***

This claim implies that we are called to be “agents for redemption,” serving as “partners with God” in the work of redemption.

But what exactly is God’s work of redemption? I must make clear that I embrace a broad view of God’s redemptive purposes. I was brought up on a narrow view of God’s redemptive purposes: the view that God only wishes to redeem individual persons. To be sure, that is one of God’s redemptive purposes. But it isn’t just individual persons who are broken. All of God’s creation is broken and “groans for redemption” (Romans 8). Therefore as clearly taught in Colossians 1:19-20: God wishes to redeem all of Creation through the finished work of Jesus Christ.

That is good Reformed theology. The famous Dutch statesman and theologian Abraham Kuyper captured this broad view of God’s redemptive purposes eloquently when he

asserted that “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence, over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry ‘mine’.”

But isn't it rather presumptuous for me to claim that we should be “partnering with God” in this great redemptive work? Some would argue that this claim places too much importance on human effort. An extreme version of this criticism holds that God wants to obliterate my will, so that God's will can reign supreme. There is no biblical basis for that point of view.

For God to obliterate your will would be to turn you into something like a stone. But God did not make you a stone. God made you to have and exercise a will. Rather than wishing to obliterate my will, God desires that my will be transformed, away from “selfish will,” which is the essence of sin, into the likeness of Christ (II Corinthians 3:18, 5:17). There should be a synergy of wills, God's and mine, as noted in Philippians 2:13: “for it is God who is at work in you, enabling **you** both **to will** and to work for his good pleasure.”

What God intends for my will is that I be so attuned to God's redemptive purposes for creation that I choose to exercise my will in harmony with God's will. John Macmurray refers to such a harmony of two wills, God's and mine, as a “unity of persons in fellowship.”

So the kingdom of God grows when there is a “harmony of wills” between Christians and God, when Christians are so attuned to God's redemptive purposes for the world that “they think God's thoughts after God,” so to speak, thereby serving as agents for God's redemptive purposes.

To be sure, there is a stark asymmetry to this “partnership with God.” As I seek to bring my intentions into conformity with my understanding of God's redemptive purposes, I rest assured, through the eyes of faith, that God's redemptive purposes will be fully realized one day, whether I contribute or not. But I can safely entrust the harvest to God. My calling is to be faithful, not necessarily successful. As I faithfully plant seeds of redemption, I can safely leave the issue of “success” in God's hands.

So, to summarize up to this point, I believe that Christians are called to be “agents” for God’s redemptive purposes by planting seeds of redemption, one day at a time, entrusting the harvest to God.

But Nicholas Wolterstorff has suggested that at the same time that we plant seeds for redemption, we should also “celebrate” when we see other seeds planted around us, and “bear witness” to the fact that these seeds are growing. So, it is good for us to rejoice with other Christians, including members of our church, when we see seeds of redemption being planted, and it is good for us to bear witness to these growing seeds by telling stories about the opportunities we have had to plant such seeds.

We will be doing that during the next few Sunday worship services. And to talk about the seeds that God has given us to plant is not to brag, provided that we acknowledge that these seeds are a gift, not something we have earned. The seeds that God calls us to plant are a gift from God, as is the redemptive harvest that God will produce from these seeds.

I close by noting a number of examples of seeds that I see being sown at American Reformed Church. I do so with some hesitation because I cannot list all the seeds I see being planted, and I am sure that there are members of our church who are planting seeds of redemption in ways that neither I nor others know anything about. But here goes anyway. As I give these illustrative examples, please pay particular attention to the great diversity in redemptive seeds that can be planted

- To give food to our Food Pantry to feed the poor in our community is to plant a seed of redemption
- To rejoice with someone who is rejoicing and to weep with someone who is weeping is to plant a seed of redemption
- To share the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ with those who do not know Jesus is to plant a seed of redemption

- To mediate conflicts between persons or groups is to plant a seed of redemption
- To nurture your children so that they come to love Jesus and commit themselves to being followers of Jesus is to plant a seed of redemption
- To serve our new Hispanic neighbors in any way is to plant a seed of redemption
- To contribute to the beauty of our sanctuary by designing banners or providing special decorations for festive holidays is to plant a seed of redemption
- To install solar panels to reduce the use of fossil fuels is to plant a seed of redemption
- To visit someone who is lonely due to being homebound is to plant a seed of redemption
- To help students of any age, in school or in church, to gain greater knowledge is to plant a seed of redemption
- To serve in leadership position at our Church, as a deacon or elder, is to plant a seed of redemption
- To minister to someone who is terminally ill is to plant a seed of redemption
- To serve on one of our three Ministry Teams at our Church, often in unheralded or behind-the-scenes ways, is to plant a seed of redemption
- To get persons who disagree with one another to talk respectfully about their disagreements, in public life and everywhere else, is to plant a seed of redemption
- To do chores for someone who can no longer help themselves is to plant a seed of redemption
- As a college student, to respond compassionately to a special need of your roommate is to plant a seed of redemption
- To pray for those who plant seeds in other ways is to plant a seed of redemption
- To bring an orphaned young child into your family is to plant a seed of redemption

- As a college student or teacher, to write a good research paper that advances knowledge is to plant a seed of redemption
- To volunteer in a hospital or a social service agency is to plant a seed of redemption
- To provide garden plots for our neighbors to plant vegetable seeds is to plant a seed of redemption
- To contribute to our worship of God through singing in the choir or praise team is to plant a seed of redemption
- To provide financial and prayer support for our community of believers and for other persons or organizations who serve God and others is to plant a seed of redemption

I could go on, but by now you get the idea. The point of my providing so many examples is to demonstrate that the diversity of redemptive seeds to be planted is enormous. That fits beautifully with the fact that the diversity of talents and abilities that God has given to us is enormous. It's a matter of matching your talents with possible seeds. As taught in I Corinthians 12, the Kingdom of God grows when each of us plants those seeds that fit best with the talents and abilities that God has given to each of us.

But you may say, "What I am doing is so small." No! No! A thousand times no! There are no small contributions to the kingdom of God. How can I be so sure about that? Because *the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree; so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.*

Thanks be to God!

