



FROM THE PULPIT

North Shore Congregational Church

“If a Church Isn’t Growing...”

Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching

Matthew 28: 16-20; Ephesians 4: 1-16

November 13, 2016

Over the course of the past 6 weeks or so, as our Stewardship Board used the parable of the Mustard Seed as a backdrop for this year’s program, I have found myself particularly engrossed in this concept of ‘growth.’ As we have talked about God growing the seeds we plant, and the tiny mustard seeds growing into that enormous bush, I have found myself constantly returning to the true essence of what that might mean. What does it mean for us to ‘grow’ as a church? When we talk about God growing the seeds we plant, what might that look like? And, frankly, more than anything else, what are differences between growth as we so often define it and the growth that God would seek to see come to fruition in our midst. And, all of that conversation took me back to a statement I heard in a group discussion a few of years ago.

“If a church isn’t growing it is, at the very least, dying – and it’s probably already dead!” I was at the annual meeting of our National Association of churches and participating in a small group conversation based on the passage Julie read from Matthew 28, and that was the claim that was made. “If a church isn’t growing it is, at the very least, dying – and it’s probably already dead!” That statement (at least as this person intended it), and the very notion it represents, is, without question, one of the most destructive notions of church life that exists in 21st century Christianity – and the more we got into this program, the more I knew that I simply could not have us emerge from this season of reflecting on God’s desires for our growth without taking the time for us to think about what that really means.

In most every way, in most every arena, we are a quantitative and numbers-driven society. Whether it is directly related to money or not, the reality is that the mark of success, in our national culture, is, almost without exception, numerical growth.

- The most successful communities are those with the most houses being built.
- The best hospitals are the ones that need extra beds.
- The best restaurants are the ones with lines out the doors.
- The best companies are those planting new franchises around the country.

Growth is the earmark of quality and success in our society. And, at some point along the way, that focus on quantitative analysis was embraced by the religious sector of society. As an institution that claims to stand above the fray when it comes to secular standards and societal values, the predominant understanding is that the best and most successful churches are the ones with overflowing parking lots, packed out sanctuaries, and jammed programs. Joel Osteen, Rick Warren, Bill Hybels – these are among the most prominent authors and speakers in the nation on issues of faith and the church. Why? Joel Osteen is the Pastor of Lakewood Church, Rick Warren founded Saddleback, and Bill Hybels started it all when he began the Willow Creek Community outside Chicago. Now, don't get me wrong, these men are all good writers and excellent speakers – it is not that their notoriety is without merit. But, the fundamental reality is that these are three of the most prominent contemporary Christian names because, and pretty much solely because, they lead three of the largest churches in the history of Christianity. And, no one thinks twice about it.

“If a church isn't growing it is, at the very least, dying – and it's probably already dead!” Theologically and biblically, the person in that group discussion rooted his claim in those words of Jesus just before his ascension that are recorded in the Gospel According to Matthew. This is after the resurrection, after Jesus appeared to his followers. These words come just before Jesus ‘ascends’ to his eternal place at the ‘right hand of God.’ It is at that point that Jesus proclaimed “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

“If a church isn't growing it is, at the very least, dying – and it's probably already dead!” As it was in this particular conversation when the man made that claim, so often when a claim such as this is made – when the quality and vitality of a church is based on its numerical growth – it is stated as a direct reflection of these words from Jesus in which he commands his followers to make disciples of all the nations. The problem in this however, the issue I take with the entire notion of examining this passage from Matthew in a mathematical fashion, is that it takes a qualitative command and turns it into a quantitative one. “Therefore go and make

disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

- Take note, here, that Jesus does not tell us to go and make worship attenders of all the nations.
- Note, here, that Jesus does not tell us to go and make church members of all the nations.
- Note, here, that Jesus does not tell us to go and make Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists or anything else of all the nations.
- Note, here, that Jesus does not tell us to go and get more board members, recruit more workers, or find more people to sit in the pew on Sunday morning.
- Note, here, that Jesus commands us to go and make disciples of all the nations. And, simply stated, that is something that cannot be measured by the number of cars in a parking lot.

In the letter to the Ephesians, in that portion of the fourth chapter that I read earlier, in a powerful description of the role and responsibility of the church, we hear, “so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ...we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.” “To grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.”

- Somewhere along the way, the vast majority of the Christian world bought into the secular valuation of growth in numbers.
- Somewhere along the way the command to ‘make disciples of all the nations’ became a command to put butts in the seats.
- Somewhere along the way, the responsibility to enhance faithfulness, nurture spirituality and encourage service became a need to draw in more people and fill the pews.
- Somewhere along the way the primary responsibility of the church changed from that of a spiritual one to one of programs, marketing and PR.

“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations!” “Grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.” Somewhere along the way the notion of creating disciples became equated with recruiting members – and church after church bought into it – hook, line and sinker! But the command Jesus lays before us is so much more than putting butts in the seats – the model laid out for us in Ephesians is so much more than growing the membership tally of a church – the Biblical goal is one of creating disciples!

“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations!” This was the final command Jesus proclaimed in the wake of his resurrection. This was the final charge Jesus issued to his followers as he ascended to Heaven. This was the pinnacle moment of what He longed for us to be, and what he called us to do, as his body on earth – and the Christian church has turned around and reduced it to little more than another social movement grappling for the ever-aversive attention of the society around us. All the while, we have missed that the call has nothing to do with growing churches – and everything to do with growing disciples!

“If a church isn’t growing it is, at the very least, dying – and it’s probably already dead!” The truth is, he was right. If a church isn’t growing it is at the very least dying, and it’s probably already dead. But, the other truth is that the growth in question has absolutely nothing to do with analyzing the Sunday morning head count and has everything to do with our growth, as individuals, and as a community, towards the head, that is Jesus Christ.

Bit by bit seeds are being planted throughout the life of this church. Not only through the EOG’s we have submitted in anticipation of 2017, but through the new initiatives we’re trying, the new programs that have begun and the new gatherings that have taken place.

- Seeds are being planted as our community is coming together in fellowship in new ways.
- Seeds are being planted as we continually discover new opportunities to use this beautiful campus we’ve been given.
- Seeds are being planted as we broaden our relationship with community groups and leaders and seek to find new ways to partner in serving the people around us.
- Seeds are being planted as new leaders step into new positions with fresh ideas and renewed energies.
- Seeds are being planted as individuals embrace their gifts and talents and find ways to use those to the betterment of our church.

Seeds are being planted by members and friends young and old, new and long-standing, in more ways than so many even imagine – and God is already bringing growth to those seeds. Will the growth put more butts in the seats? I don’t know! But, there is, and there will be, continued growth as God works through the seeds we plant – and there is simply no greater life for a church than that!