

"A REMEDY FOR THE DISCOURAGED"
October 22, 1989

TEXT: Mark 4:26 "And he said, 'The Kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow he knows not how.'"

Now that this sermon is written, I think perhaps I should have called it "A Remedy for Stress", but, at the time, I may have been too stressed to think of that. Still, stress and discouragement often go together. A little stress, of course, is good for us. It whets our appetites, keeps us on our toes, and helps us to do our best. That is what psychologists call "eu-stress", good stress. But a little goes a long, long way, and when stress becomes too great, or lasts too long, then it can be destructive. That is called "dis-stress" or bad stress. And it can leave us tired, frustrated, and discouraged.

We live in a very stressful world. Noise, for instance, is a major stress producer, and we are surrounded by noise from the moment we get up in the morning till the time we go to bed at night. Change also causes stress, even good change, and our world is changing more rapidly than ever before. In his book, Future Shock, Alvin Tofler, argues that this rate of change is increasing every year and that more and more people will crumple under the stress which it produces. Add to this the sheer number of people around us, the speed at which we live, and the constant demands upon our lives, and it is little wonder that more and more people find themselves stressed, exhausted, and discouraged. That is what we call "burnout."

This morning, then, I would like to offer a remedy, a remedy for the stressed and the discouraged. A remedy for burnout. It is not a new remedy. It has been around nearly two thousand years. Yet it is as fresh as this morning's sunrise. You can find it in Mark's gospel, chapter four, verse twenty six: "And he said, 'The Kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow he knows not how.'" The first time you hear that, it might not sound like much, certainly not like much about discouragement. But bear with me. I think I can show the connection. For in this little parable there are three magnificent reminders, each of them a remedy for the discouraged.

The first of these is TRUST. Even today, we know very little about how seeds grow. Most of us do not even care. What is important, is that, somehow, when good seed is planted in good soil, it does grow. Not every seed, perhaps, but more than enough to justify the farmer's effort. And everyone who ever plants a crop, does so in trust. Trust that the power of God is

at work in those seeds to make them grow. Jesus, who loved to use examples from everyday life to make a point, tells us that God's better world is as certain as that. As surely as harvest follows planting, God's Kingdom comes.

The disciples needed to hear that. They had given up everything to follow Jesus because they believed him to be the Messiah. The one who would bring about the long-awaited Kingdom of God. Yet, there were doubts, too. As day after day went by, and the Kingdom seemed no closer than ever, the icy hand of discouragement clutched at their hearts. Some were even getting ready to leave, to go back to their nets and their families. So Jesus told them this parable. "Fear not, little children, the Kingdom of God is coming, as surely as harvest follows seedtime."

They needed that. And we need it, too. We worry about the violence around us. More murders in Milwaukee already this year than ever before, and we still have ten weeks to go. We worry about growing old in a world where age is no longer revered and respected. We worry about our children and our children's children, growing up in a world that in many ways seems foreign to us. We worry about a lot of things, and, as we worry, we sometimes get discouraged. Like the disciples, we, too, need to hear Jesus say, "Fear not, little children." In spite of everything, God's power is at work in the world, just as it is in a seed. You may not understand it. You may not even see it. But it is there just the same."

And the second concept is PATIENCE. Some time ago I read Madeleine L'Engle's wonderful little book, A Wrinkle in Time. Ostensibly written for juveniles, it is a wonderful combination of science fiction and Christian teaching. And not the least of its messages is the importance of patience, a quality sadly lacking in her young heroine --and in most of us as well.

Some of those in Jesus' day were so impatient they had decided to take matters into their own hands. Tired of waiting for God, they formed terrorists bands known as zealots, determined to overthrow their Roman conquerors by means of sabotage and assassination. At least one the disciples was a zealot. And Judas Iscariot may have been another. To them, and to us, Jesus told this parable, not only as a call to faith, but also as a call to patience. The harvest comes, but it comes at its own pace.

I learned that in a very personal way some years ago, when I was living in Kansas. I had a vegetable garden, and one of the things that experience taught me was a new respect for that wonderful passage in Ecclesiastes, "To everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under the heavens." I learned, for instance, that peas could be planted in early March. (At least they can in southern Kansas; I would not try it here.) Tomatoes, on the other hand, could not be set outside till May. I also learned that spinach and lettuce had to be planted early enough to mature before the 100 degree weather came in June. Each

crop, indeed each variety, had its own built-in timetable. And I learned that, no matter how impatient I became, there would be no tomatoes, no corn, no cabbage till the proper time in each plant's cycle. In this morning's parable, I hear Jesus telling us the same thing. God's better world comes, but in God's own way and in God's own time.

The problem, of course, is that most of us want it to come in our way and according to our time. The other day John Currier told me a story about a man who was praying, and, somewhat to his surprise, God actually answered him. And the man asked, "God, how long is a million years in Your sight?" And God said, "My Son, a million of your years is but a second in my sight." Then the man said, "Well, God, how much is a million dollars in Your sight?" And God said, "My Son, a million of your dollars is but a penny in my sight." Then the man asked, "God, could I have one of Your pennies?" And God replied, "Of course, My Son. Just a second." God's better world comes, but it comes according to God's schedule, and not according to ours.

And the third concept which I find in this parable is PARTNERSHIP. So often discouragement stems from the sheer magnitude of the tasks we see confronting us. We feel overwhelmed because we think we have to do everything ourselves. We have what is sometimes called a "Messiah complex." But Jesus said, "The Kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground . . . and the seed should sprout and grow he knows not how. The earth produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear."

I find that liberating. For I confess that sometimes I feel like the minister who left his house every night about 11:00 o'clock and disappeared for half an hour. Pretty soon there began to be talk, and his deacons confronted him about this strange behavior. And the minister answered, "Well, it's true. Every night I do leave the house about eleven. But all I do is walk down to the railroad station. I get there just in time to watch the 11:15 go by. And I think to myself, 'Thank heaven there's one thing around here I don't have to push.'"

I suspect there are times when you feel like that, too. If so, you can take comfort from Christ's reminder that God's better world comes largely by God's action, not our own. We just have to do our part. The farmer does not have to make the seed grow, but he has to prepare the ground and plant the seed. And, while the seed grows, he has to keep the weeds away.

We have to do something, too, but we do not have to do it all. All God asks of us is that we take the gifts He gives us and plant them, as it were, where they can grow to a bountiful harvest. God takes care of the rest, for we are in partnership with Him. Jesus said, "Take my yoke upon you and learn of me and you will find rest for your souls." Faith, patience, partnership. Think on these things. They are God's remedy for the discouraged.