

A few years ago, Pastor Kristofer Skrade was in his thirties and was a minister at Kent Lutheran Church in Washington State. He attended a New Year's Eve costume party, but could not think of anything to wear except his clergy garb. Party-goers were dressed as cats, pirates, even Arabian sheiks, but he came as what he was, a pastor. Like the other people there he was young, wore a goatee and spoke the same language, but they did not believe he was actually a pastor. One young woman told him she did not believe in God. Many of the others echoed that statement and he knew he was in an environment far different from his usual church work with church people. /

But as he talked with these twenty-somethings and thirty-somethings, Generation Xers and Millennials, he came to realize that what they wanted was authenticity not authority. They were isolated. Many had come from broken homes and they yearned for commitment and caring and community. He also came to understand by the end (1)

of the evening, that the four people who told him they were atheists, turned out, in conversation, not to be. They just resented the church. In fact, what they seemed not to understand was that they really wanted a relationship with Jesus Christ. Pastor Skrade said what we as the Church should be aware of is that a whole generation of Christians needed to be reached again, without an attitude of superiority, but with authenticity, reached with the message and person of Jesus Christ. (pause) /

God's Kingdom grows in mysterious, miraculous ways. Ancient people knew nothing about the power which transformed a seed into a plant. They had no time-lapse photography but they did have an awe in the face of the natural world. The farmer would sow the grain and then wait. The rains would come and the farmer would get up night and day and watch the growth and then when the harvest came would reap the rewards of that harvest, then give thanks to God who gave the growth. And it was this image which Jesus used to speak about the growth of his people, the Church. / (2)

God's Kingdom comes as a tiny seed, as small as the mustard seed, but when planted and tended would grow into the greatest of plants and produce grain fit to be harvested. Similarly, God's Word planted and tended would grow into a saving faith. People would come to know and love the Lord not so much by techniques and programs, not by gimmicks, but by authentic witness and sharing and caring in a relationship. /

Caring is an interesting concept and word. It comes from kara, the Greek word meaning to "cry out." To care means to "cry out" with those who are ill, confused, lonely, isolated, forgotten. It means to "cry out" with the Millennials/Gen Z's who are suspicious of organized religion, Generation Xers who fear commitment, and Baby-Boomers in mid-life crisis, impending retirement and older people who feel redundant and left behind. /

Henri Nouwen, theologian and great spiritual leader, has written that we care, "to enter the world of those who are broken and powerless and to establish there a fellowship of the weak; to care is (3)

to embrace affectionately those who are touched by hostile hands, to listen attentively to those whose words are only heard by greedy ears and to speak gently with those who are used to harsh orders and impatient requests; to be present to those who suffer and to stay present when nothing can be done to change their situation.” (pause) /

God’s Kingdom comes in mysterious and wonderful ways, like a seed that miraculously grows day and night until the grain is ready to be harvested. It is like a mustard seed, one of the smallest of all the seeds that can produce something akin to a mustard tree where the birds will make their nests in the shade. /

It is hard, sometimes, for us to understand that our task is to sow, to water and to watch and wait for the harvest. We are activists in a society that rewards doing rather than thinking and talking and being. We quickly look to the bottom line. We want success in business, family, schools, and in our churches. We are uncomfortable with anything that does not show clear results. But God’s Kingdom is not quantifiable. It cannot be measured by human tools. The parables (4)

of Jesus are clear that which human beings can witness to others, can preach and teach the Gospel, can be present caring for others—it is really God’s Spirit which works in human hearts to build faith. We may plant and water and watch but it is God who gives the growth. (pause) /

That’s a word which we all need to hear. The call is to preach God’s Word, to administer the sacraments, to teach, to challenge and care for God’s people, but it is easy to get sidetracked by meetings and programs and paperwork. The church wants growth in numbers and financial support. Our neighbors—and we ourselves—compare our congregations to those that are growing and expanding in program, staff, building space. We want results, but ‘soul care’ isn’t easily translated into statistical results. (pause) /

Dr. Nouwen continues, “What we want is to bring about changes, to make a visible difference. To be a professional means to master the skills with which we can repair what is broken, put together what has fallen apart, reunite what is disjointed, restore what is decayed and heal what is ill. In short, to be a professional means to be someone who (5)

cures rather than cares. Doctors are considered good doctors when their patients who entered a hospital on a stretcher can leave on their own feet. Psychologists are called competent when their clients feel less confused after treatment than before. Social workers are seen as capable when their interventions make a difference in the life of the community. Also, ministers are praised according to the successes of their programs and projects.” (go slow) He continues, “but slowly, imperceptibly, maybe, we have made our sense of “self” dependent not on who we are, but on what we do; not on our inner strength but on the results of our work, not our personal integrity but on the praise or blame of our mill-you’s (milieus)—we have become so oriented toward success that we have become what others make of us, we have sold our soul to the world.” (long pause) /

After spending four years in seminary with roughly 40 other students, as we approached its conclusion several of the graduates said they were leaving the ministry. These are very likeable, warm, friendly people who have tried their best to serve God and the people in (6)

their charge. What prompted them to leave Christian service for different worldly pursuits is just this emphasis on results. Their congregation hadnot grown even though they worked very hard just to maintain it. They felt isolated from other clergy and felt ignored by the church authorities. /

    Their stories are not unusual, in fact may even be rather typical. Thirty years ago, pastors were the healthiest people in America, but no longer. They show all the diseases of stress that folks in business, medicine, education and the arts do. Ministers are not immune from depression or addiction. There is a lot of pressure to make our churches grow and laity and pastors alike feel that pressure. /

    We are all in this boat together, but we have forgotten that it is God who works the miracle of growth. It is up to us, as disciples, to plant, tend and watch. We need to be clear that we care about people and their relationship to Christ, not institutional maintenance. Growth is God's miracle, not our work. / (7)

We may not understand what the parables tell us—Jesus’ hearers had the same problem. The parables tell us to value people for who they are, not what they have done or what they possess. In fact, the parables teach us to value what is insignificant, small, forgotten the more surprise when the tiniest mustard seed grows into the largest of trees. (pause) /

When the Emperor Valerian was persecuting the Church, he demanded that it hand over its treasures. St Lawrence, the Deacon, gave away the church wealth to the poor and brought the poor people of Rome, its old people, the lame and sick and widowed to the emperor. These, he said, were the treasures of the Church. It is our children, our teenagers, our twenty-somethings and thirty-somethings, our mid-life troubled, our aged, our infirm, our minorities, our powerless, the financially strapped, our handicapped, the marginalized, the disenfranchised these are people important to God. They like we need to be told over and over again of God’s love—God loves them and accepts them and values them. /// It is in people like this who have (8)

come to know Jesus Christ, that the seed is planted, water and grows until the harvest. God gives the growth. Our job is to sow and water, sleep and rise night and day, to tend to what has been planted. The rest is up to God. Amen. /////