

Mark 4:26-34
June 14, 2009

South Plains

Free Range Churches and Children

Everybody knows that free range chickens are chickens that run free in the chicken yard eating nutritious bugs and beetles instead of spending their life cooped up in a cage eating hormone-laced pellets. *Free Range Kids*, I learned last week, refers to a book that argues that children need time and space when they are not in the protective custody of parents. The author cites statistics showing that kids are as safe today as when their parents were growing up. I doubt that the statistics will reassure many of the parents and grandparents I know. However, I have to agree that kids need opportunities to explore the world without the structure of play-dates and sports camps, without the input of internet games and news updates, and without security cameras and GPS tracking devices.

But, what in the world, you are asking, is a free-range church? A free-range church is a congregation that recognizes and rejoices in the freedom of God's grace to make it grow. A free-range church does not depend for its vitality on the orthodoxy of its confessions, as important as sound doctrine is.

Nor does it look for life-giving spirit in the Book of Order, as necessary as those rules and procedures may be.

Nor does it follow formulas for church growth and programs for spiritual success, as helpful as those programs sometimes are.

A free-range church listens to the word of the Lord and follows the leading of the Holy Spirit even at the risk of its own life. It has this freedom because it trusts the grace of God in Jesus Christ to guide it, and grow it every day. A free range church believes that it will prosper according to the will of God. It will learn from the experience of other churches, but it will lay out its own path in obedience to the particular mission God puts before it. It draws inspiration and energy from other people of faith without insisting on their magic recipe for success. A free-range church depends on God for its life.

Part of the grace of creation is that God made human beings with the potential to grow up healthy and whole in spite of the mistakes and shortcomings of parents. That's no excuse for bad parenting. It nonetheless should be a source of solace and encouragement for us all.

Jesus tells a little parable about planting seeds that makes the same point. The farmer scatters seed on the ground and goes about her business, day and night, and the seed sprouts and grows, and the farmer has no idea how it happens. "The earth produces of itself," Jesus says. Now, I'm sure a first century farmer had work to do, preparing the ground and perhaps weeding

until harvest time. But, it was the good earth doing the miraculous work of producing a harvest. The kingdom of God is like this, according to Jesus. It grows and produces because the mysterious power of God works through the kingdom in the world.

Is that incredible? Is it too much to believe that God, not the farmer, makes the earth fruitful? Well, try another parable. “The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade,” so says Jesus.

Now, my fact-checker tells me that the mustard plant is not exactly the greatest shrub. It’s an annual that shoots up in one season and then dies, which probably means that it matures too late for nesting by most birds, and it’s not very sturdy anyway. The whole parable is an exaggeration. As a matter of fact, the parable is not only hyperbole, it’s also misleading. A naïve farmer might be encouraged to do nothing to make crops grow, a recipe for disaster in a subsistence economy. But, Jesus is not teaching agriculture 101. He’s encouraging his followers to depend on God’s grace, a grace we cannot see. More importantly, it’s a grace we cannot make happen; any more than a farmer can make a kernel buried in the field become a tall stalk with plump ears of sweet corn.

Most parents have dreams and sometimes nightmares about the influence we will have on our children. If they listen to Baby Einstein, maybe they will be brilliant. We watch them run across the grass outside the sanctuary, and we wonder we can encourage them to go to the Olympics. We need to nurture their talents just as we need to nurture their faith. But, the hard truth is that we cannot control the outcome. Finally, the harvest of adulthood is up to God.

What could be more absurd than the belief that a splash of water and a few words over a baby’s head will influence his adult faith in God? The water will evaporate into thin air in a few moments. The words I spoke at Joseph’s baptism are just that, words, sounds, vibrations fading into the ether. Baptism is a promise of abundant life God makes to us. The kingdom of God is like that: hidden, mysteriously at work in each life a little differently

In the end, we do the things a Christian parent does. We bring our children to worship and Sunday School. We pray at home and rehearse the Bible stories. We teach the difference between right and wrong. We show how to admit our sins and ask forgiveness. And, we hope in God’s future. But, we know nothing is guaranteed to protect our children and bring them to a happy adulthood. Ultimately, God is in charge. That’s why we commit them to God’s keeping in the sacrament of baptism. That’s why we profess our trust in God’s grace in the words of the Apostles’ Creed.

The same way grace works in our lives as we grow up, grace is working in the life of the church. I cannot tell you how many books I have read that offer a program to make good things happen in the church: Five steps to raise the roof. Ten ways to increase attendance. Eleven steps to an explosive small group ministry. Twelve keys to an effective church. Forty days to a purpose-driven church. Forty-four steps up off the plateau. They are all books that can teach me, but none of them are guaranteed to work unless God's grace makes it happen.

More recently, I have wanted a roadmap that told me exactly how to get from point A, that picture of Kirk Hall sitting on the mantle in the manse, to point B, a real building in the ground. The county and our architect and our construction committee have a rough sketch of that roadmap, but I have had to learn that getting from "A" to "B" depends upon the grace of God.

Jesus wants his disciples to know that's the way the kingdom of God always works. The health and well-being of South Plains is the result of mysterious graces working beyond our control, and beyond our deserving. It may look as though reasonably smart people like us ought to be able to pull the levers and grease the wheels of progress to produce a building on our schedule. That's not the way the kingdom grows.

We scatter the seed and sleep and rise night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows, and we do not

know how. What we know for sure is that God is charge and will bring about the result God's wants in God's good time.