

# WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/JUNE 14, 2009

## A SIMPLE PLAN/MARK 4:26-34

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### I. THE TEXT

This morning the lectionary's gospel lesson invites us to consider a parable of encouragement from the great story-teller Jesus. Parables are generally simple-sounding stories using ordinary events as metaphors for God's extraordinary world and ways – a woman sweeping a floor, a family argument over inheritance. But Jesus' stories are not just nice little stories told simply for our enjoyment. For those with ears to hear, as Jesus put it, these friendly tales have depth that sits just below the surface of what is obvious. They are stories designed to set the mind and soul to work... puzzles or riddles that we are left to figure out for ourselves – because Jesus rarely had much to say about them once they'd been told.

This morning's text includes a very short parable, which Jesus uses to describe the kingdom of heaven. Hear the word of God from Mark 4...

*<sup>26</sup>He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, <sup>27</sup>and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. <sup>28</sup>The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. <sup>29</sup>But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."*

*<sup>30</sup>He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? <sup>31</sup>It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; <sup>32</sup>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."*

*<sup>33</sup>With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; <sup>34</sup>he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.*

**II. PRAYER:** Lord, we come today believing that the Word written long ago in a faraway place has the power to speak to us still today. And so, we ask that you would speak to us today. Amen.

### III. A SIMPLE PLAN

In a parable of his own titled *The Man Who Planted Trees*, French writer Jean Giono writes the wonderful tale of a trip to the foot of the French Alps in 1913. Except for a few flowers and a bit of grass, Giono, the narrator, found the land there in the valley below the mountains to be almost barren. On that first visit, Giono happened upon a lone shepherd tending his flock. He noticed a large basket hanging from the shepherd's neck – a basket filled with acorns. The shepherd told Giono that as he roamed the desolate countryside with his sheep, he would stop every little bit and plant an acorn. And every day since 1900... for 13 years... the shepherd had planted 100 acorns.

The shepherd's name was Elzéard Bouffier. Giono asked Bouffier, "why plant your acorns here in such a desolate place – even the stream that used to run with fresh water has

practically dried up – why not go to a part of France that is more promising?” Bouffier answered – “my work is to make France beautiful and I intend to plant 100 acorns every day for the rest of my life.”

Giono returned home but he often thought of the shepherd and his simple plan – seven years later, in 1920 he returned to see if anything had come of Bouffier’s planting project. Somewhat surprised, he found a small forest beginning to grow – with trees about shoulder height. Thirteen years later, in 1933 Giono returned again – not only were there trees – the acorns had grown into oak trees and a forest had sprung to life – the stream flowed again with water. Giono went to the French government and they declared the region a state forest and passed laws to protect it. Fourteen years later, in 1947 Giono returned again to find Elzéard Bouffier, now rather old, still planting acorns. But this time the ecology of the whole region had changed. Communities sprang up on the edge of the forest, children hiked its paths, schools and hospitals, gardens and parks grew up in the shadow of the great forest.<sup>1</sup> A simple shepherd, with a simple planting scheme, changed his corner of the world.

This is what happens when a simple plan takes root in the garden of God.

#### **IV. MUSTARD SEEDS**

Jesus told the tale of another simple planting scheme, but this one is as odd as Giono’s inspirational tale is charming. He talks of the kingdom of heaven – something he talks about all the time – over 100 times in the gospels Jesus speaks either of the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven – interchangeable terms really. We know now, of course, that when Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God he is not talking about a kingdom with borders that can be defined by castles or armies or GNP or political parties. The kingdom of heaven is difficult to describe, like friendship or mercy or love. Most often Jesus gives us insight into the kingdom using simile or parable, or describing an action – the kingdom of God is like a net let down in a lake, an ear of grain blossoming, a treasure found, a pearl sought, a wedding banquet enjoyed– the list goes on and on – each word picture describing some important thing we need to know about this kingdom into which we are called.

In this morning’s Kingdom of heaven lesson, Jesus likens it to a mustard seed. Now, imagine being in the crowd that day when Jesus springs this one on them. Perhaps Jesus even pulled a mustard seed or two out of his pocket and held it up for the crowd to see. I put a fairly life-size photo of a pile of mustard seeds on the front of our morning bulletin. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed – get a good look now. Pretty impressive aren’t they? Come on Jesus – are you joking? You are recruiting for a mustard seed kingdom? I might sign on for a kingdom that resembles a mighty oak or a great cedar – but a mustard bush?

I do imagine that Jesus told this little story with a bit of a twinkle in his eye. You see the mustard seeds he held up were probably black mustard – a weed – a volunteer – no real farmer would intentionally plant mustard seeds. And black mustard grows into a large bush, not a great tree. Yes, large enough for birds to take refuge in but certainly not noble like a towering pine, or grand like a giant redwood. Black mustard’s impressiveness is not so much its size as it is its ability to spread. It’s more like kudzu – the weed now overwhelming several southeastern states, or dandelions that take over front lawns overnight. Jesus is saying, this little tiny mustard seed doesn’t look like it will amount to much – but plant it, and before you know it takes over like a dandelion patch... that’s what the kingdom of God is like.

A remarkably short story about a troublesome tree – and then there is nothing more said about it. So I suppose we could all just go home and leave the story be.

## V. REFLECTIONS

That's what Jesus does – tells stories and assigns homework – this is not a lecture class, it is an applied theology seminar. That is the point of a parable – what matters is your homework. You hear the story and then mull it over, you think about it in the shower and as you pray and on the freeway and on your patio over a cup of coffee. The question is not so much – what does the parable mean, rather, what does the parable mean for you. Where do you fit in the story? What might God be saying to you?

Because I don't have as much courage as Jesus I can't just leave this parable alone, so I'm going to say a bit more about what I find in it that helps me understand the kingdom of God. Again, don't take my word for it – what matters is what this story says to you about your life in God's kingdom.

### A. Ways of the Kingdom

One way of hearing this parable is to reflect on the ways things get done in the God's kingdom. Contrary to the ways of the world, God begins with the small, quiet, almost imperceptible, even problematic things and uses them to make big things happen. Walk through the pages of Scripture and hear this theme repeated over and over again – Jesus takes the smallest acts of faith, little kindnesses, simple deeds of courage, seemingly insignificant acts of faithfulness and uses them to nudge the world toward goodness. A cup of water given in Christ's name, the widow's mite, a tiny baby born in Bethlehem – you see, in God's kingdom, it is about tiny seeds, ordinary things. Notice that God rarely begins with the grandiose or majestic – very often God uses what the rest of the world discounts – like a mustard seed – things without honor or prestige, things not likely to be seen on the front pages.

Fast forward a couple thousand years and you see the kingdom of God flowering – and still from tiny beginnings. Rosa Parks refusing to move to the back of the bus; Mahatma Gandhi fasting to end sectarian violence in India, and here in California a story that radiated all the way across the country just last Christmas when a class of fifth-graders in Newport Beach, shaved their heads so a classmate receiving chemotherapy wouldn't feel so different. Small acts, little seeds that changed the course of history for nations and for fifth-graders.

When God begins something, it almost always looks as if nothing will come of it. The mustard seed doesn't look like it will amount to much, but neither do we when God first gets hold of us. For me, the parable is a tremendous source of comfort and hope – in our culture's obsession with large and flashy, it is easy at times to imagine that something large and earth-shattering is required of us... when it is really the simple acts of loving God and loving our neighbor that God can use best – that is the way things work in God's garden. Mother Teresa of Calcutta put it this way: “In this life we cannot do great things. We can only do small things with great love.”

### B. Gifts of Seed

There is something else Jesus' parable provokes in me. When I hear the story I am reminded of the small seeds planted by God's gardeners in my life. Parents who taught me to pray, a grandmother who helped me experience what the words, “Jesus Loves Me,” really meant, a college professor who told me he thought I'd actually amount to something some

day. Little seeds that by God's grace sprouted and grew and have made a huge difference in my life. Who has planted kingdom seeds in your soul?

Little steps that become big realities. So many could be named this morning – a 1984 WPC dream that people without homes would have a warm meal and clothing, medical care, job training– a small seed that grew into a ministry we call PATH – People Assisting the Homeless that has made the difference for thousands and thousands of our society's cast-offs. A 1985 WPC dream that Los Angeles County's abused and neglected children lost in the system would find themselves in foster homes overflowing with tender care and compassion – a small seed that grew into the ministry we call Childshare that last year alone placed over 600 of our most vulnerable in loving foster care homes. A 1982 WPC dream that the holidays would be brighter for the poor, for whom the holidays are particularly difficult – a small seed of love that took root and grew into the Deacon Holiday food basket ministry that provided Christmas dinner last year for over 650 hungry families.

That's the way the kingdom of heaven works – when tiny seeds are planted, there are tangible results – birds of the air come and make nests in its branches, lives are changed. I trust Jesus' little parable reminds you of the generations of seed-planters in this community of faith whose small acts of faithfulness God has used to change your corner of the world.

### **C. Planters**

One last thing from this parable this morning – I hear a call in there to plant seeds. Heard from one angle, in Jesus' stories, it is God who plants the seeds. But hear the stories again and discover that we are now the gardeners – that is the way things work in the kingdom of God – we are how God gets good things done. God's work becomes our work – and God is intent on using us to make our corner of the world a better place.

I am reminded of the great existentialist philosopher Charlie Brown in the Peanuts cartoon strip. Baby sister Sally has just arrived and Charlie Brown is fretting about the awful world his baby sister would have to grow up in. Depressed, he dumps his concerns on his pal Linus, listing out a litany of all that was going wrong in the world. But Linus would hear nothing of it – “I think” said Linus, “that that world today is a better place than it was six years ago.”

Charlie Brown protested, “Linus, don't you read the papers, aren't you watching television or listening to the radio? How can you possibly say that the world is better today than it was six years ago?”

Linus looked at Charlie Brown and in all seriousness stated, “It is better now because I am in it.”

Perhaps that is the spirit Jesus asks of you and me – that we live with intention and a commitment that our corner of the world will be better for our having spent time here... I am certain that is what Jesus asks of us as a church. What dreams, what seeds reside in your soul? What new seeds is God calling us to plant? We will continue to tend and water the mustard-size bushes planted in the 70s & 80s – what new seeds will we plant? What do you imagine? In what sort of church will that happen? By what kind of people will the planting be done? Perhaps 13 or 23 years from now homelessness in Los Angeles will be history... 4 or 12 years from now, as Martin Luther King Jr. dreamed, all of our nation's children “will be judged not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character”... that one day soon all of God's precious children will be educated and well fed and have adequate health care. All

because the people of God proclaimed the love of Jesus Christ, one little mustard seed at a time.

Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple, said: "The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members." It begins with an itty-bitty mustard seed. God, quietly, through us, doing our best to make the world look a little more like heaven. Simple gifts of grace, small steps of courage, little touches of compassion, seemingly insignificant pushes against the darkness. It's all God asks – a simple plan, really – acorns here and there, an open door, an extended hand, a dream we make real – it's the way things work in the kingdom of God.

## VI. HOMEWORK

That is where this parable took me. Again, don't take my word for it – what matters is what you take from this story that helps you understand your life as a resident in the kingdom of God.

A wise person once said, "*The best time to plant a tree is 25 years ago... The second best time is today.*" The kingdom of God is like a basket of acorns, a mustard seed – small things with the potential for extraordinary consequences. What do these stories mean for you? You've got homework...

Amen and amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Giono, *The Man Who Planted Trees: The Story of the Life of Elzéard Bouffier*.