

June 18, 2006  
Psalm 1, Mark 4:26-34  
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### "The Mystery of God's Kingdom"

I have always thought that the mark of a great teacher is the gift to be able to put great truths simply without oversimplifying. All of us have suffered through classes, lectures, books that seem to delight more in unnecessarily complex language, obscure arguments and incomprehensible logic than the simple truth. Tolstoy wrote, "There is no greatness where there is not simplicity, goodness and truth." (*War and Peace*, XIV, 18). Jesus is the great teacher because he combines so perfectly "simplicity, goodness and truth." Jesus uses everyday, ordinary experiences and common objects to talk about extraordinary matters and uncommon realities. He takes things like flowers, rain, yeast, birds, sheep and seeds to talk about the kingdom of God. He speaks of experiences like losing, sharing, working, seeking and risking that tell of God's ways among us. Jesus uses a familiar world to help us see into the unfamiliar world of the kingdom.

Jesus tells a parable about a man who goes out to scatter seeds in a field. Jesus is saying that if we want to see the fruits of the kingdom, then we have to plant the seeds of the kingdom. Sometimes, we are afraid to give what we have, invest what we have earned, share what is ours or risk what is precious to us. We hold on to what we have. Jesus teaches us that the one way to be sure to lose something is by trying to hold onto it. If you save your life, you will lose it. If you hide your talents in a hole, then what you have will be taken away. I heard what happened one Sunday morning in a Presbyterian church in a small farming community. During the summer months there were many Hispanic migrant laborers who worked on the produce farms in that community. One migrant came to the door of the Presbyterian Church and asked in broken English for a Bible. While the man waited at the door of the church, an elder scrambled around until he could find a Bible to give to the man. I don't know if the stranger was asked to come in the church or not. All I know is that as he walked away with the Bible in his hand, the elder called after him, "Be sure to bring it back." God will not hold us accountable for failing. God will hold us accountable for not trying.

It took me a long time to realize that the church is not just another organization, civic group or club to which we belong. The church is the body of Christ, where we experience together the presence of the Holy Spirit and where we join together as a community of faith, worship and love. Over the years, I have heard a number of people say, in one way or another, that being a part of the church does not mean very much to them. I have always wondered what they give of themselves to the community of faith, how much of their resources they share with others, when are they involved with the church in serving others in the community, or where are they taking the risk of loving people who are different from themselves. Paul described the kind of active love that defines the church. "Love is patient; love is kind... Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

Such love is more than a "feeling." Such love is an act of the will that demands something of us. You have to scatter the seeds of love if you want a rich harvest of grace.

Jesus tells us that while the sower sleeps, the seed grows mysteriously. The parable emphasizes that the sower does not see or understand how the seed grows. Some unseen force beyond the sower and beyond the seed pushes it toward growth. As human beings, we have a hard time dealing with what we cannot control and what we do not understand. We prefer an overly simple explanation to no explanation at all. We like to thin that we are in control of our lives and of our environment, even when we are not. One look through a powerful microscope or an equally powerful telescope should be sufficient to dispel that illusion. Often, it is not. The great madnnesses of the past century, so evidenced by racism, Stalinism, Nazism and all the other "isms," are the result of the desperate effort of anxious and insecure human beings to control what cannot and should not be controlled. Dr. Ernest Campbell, the former pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, once said that we human beings are always trying to escape from the mysterious to the manageable.

Jesus reminds us of the mysterious character of life. The mystery that surrounds us is good. God is at work in ways that we can neither see nor understand. Written over the portal of the Catholic hospital in Norfolk, Virginia, are these words, "We bind the wounds, but God heals them." Those words remind everyone who enters the hospital of the mystery of God's goodness. At times, we catch a glimpse of God's handprint, feel the wind off God's back as God passes by or hear the echo of God's voice in the voices of those around us. Jesus tells us that what we cannot see is just as real, if not more real, than what we can see.

This past Friday evening, I returned with the members and leaders of our 2006 Footsteps of Faith class which had spent the last eleven days walking in the footsteps of Paul, John and Peter in Greece, Turkey and Italy. Early in the trip we visited the island of Patmos, where the disciple John was exiled and where tradition holds he wrote the book of Revelation. According to tradition, John received the vision of Revelation in a small cave on the island. Our group climbed down the steep steps into the cave where John received his vision and wrote the last book of the Bible. In the cave, we joined pilgrims from all over Greece as a priest of the Orthodox Church held a service of remembrance for the faithful dead. Light streamed in through a window and pierced the heavy smoke from the burning of sweet incense. Prayers were chanted and familiar words spoken in an unfamiliar language. Later, as we left the cave, we were given bread to share that had been blessed by the priest. The moment touched all of our senses - sight, sound, taste, touch and smell. All of these senses combined to remind us that behind all things that we perceive with our senses, there is something more, something greater, that we cannot see, hear, taste, touch or smell that is fundamentally mysterious and holy.

Jesus invites us to trust in things that we cannot see when we are tempted to live solely on the basis of what we can see. When Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, they thought they had seen the last of that annoying, spoiled kid. Little did they know that God would use their jealousy to save their people from famine. If you had asked me who was going to win the fight between David and Goliath, I would have put all my money on Goliath. If I

were on the committee to pick someone to be the mother of the Lord, I certainly wouldn't have picked a young, unknown girl from a one-horse town like Nazareth. If I were to start a new religion, I don't think I would have chosen the thick headed, strong willed, rustic characters that Jesus did.

We want to live by what I call "reality," not by some seemingly impossible dream. Reality teaches us that we've got to look out for number one, that we cannot be too careful and that we should do it unto others before they do it unto us. Maybe we see so much pettiness, selfishness and mean-spiritedness in our families, places of work and communities because we are being overly influenced by "reality" and under-influenced by faith. When we trust what we cannot see, we can live without fear, give away what we treasure and care about other people. Jesus believed more in the things that cannot be seen than in the things that can be seen. Therefore, he loved the unlovable, touched the leper, fed the hungry and accepted the cross. Jesus is teaching us to see the world with new eyes. He wants us to see the unfamiliar loving, just and gracious ways of the kingdom as what is most real. He wants us to see the familiar cruelty, selfishness and pettiness of life as what is most unreal. Through the parables of Jesus, the unfamiliar becomes familiar and the all too familiar becomes strange.

Finally, the parables promise us that there will be a harvest. We scatter the seeds of the gospel. We wait. We wonder if what we have done and how we have lived will make any difference. Jesus says that the kingdom grows in the midst of a world that refuses to see it. There will be a harvest of grace. Jesus tells the parable of the mustard seed immediately after the parable of the seed growing secretly so that you and I will understand just what kind of harvest it will be. From the tiny mustard seed grows a great shrub that is large enough to give shelter to all the birds of the air. When we are discouraged about the insignificance of what we do in the name of faith, Jesus reminds us of the astonishing results that even the smallest things will bring.

Everything you do in faith makes a difference. The beautiful words of the Psalm 1 remind us that the faithful become "like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do they prosper." When I was in Norfolk, I served a congregation that was composed predominately of elderly members. Yet, that loving congregation wanted to do something for the community. There was a great need in Norfolk for day care for infants. So, the congregation voted to renovate a section of the church building to meet the stringent codes to care for fifty infants and toddlers. They did this at their own expense - not so much for their own children, but for the children of the community. Then, the neighborhood reacted against the project. Transporting fifty children would create too much traffic. Infants and toddlers playing outside would create too much noise. You would have thought the church was putting in a large scale "hog operation." For a moment, the congregation wondered if the project was worth the trouble of negotiating with the neighborhood. Believing that what they were doing would make a difference, they proceeded. They did such a good job of responding to the concerns of the neighborhood that the neighborhood association voted unanimously to support the project before the Zoning Board.

What you do in the name of faith makes a difference. Over the last two weeks, I watched the mysterious work of God make a difference in the lives of the twenty-two youth and adults who participated in the Footsteps of Faith trip. What we sensed in the cave of St. John bore fruit in our lives as we were molded by God's grace into a spiritual community. Our faith deepened and our sense of what matters in life was transformed. We saw the work of God through the centuries, through the rise and fall of empires and in our own lives. I saw the seeds of faith being planted in the lives of our young adults as they prepare to go to college in a few short weeks. They will go with a deeper sense of the mystery of God's kingdom and with a deeper sense of purpose in their own lives. God's work is far from complete in our lives and in our world. Over the past two weeks, I had the privilege of catching a glimpse of the bountiful harvest that God will produce in their lives. I felt my own faith grow.

God works in mysterious ways to produce a great harvest of faith. God will bless and use our efforts to make a difference in the lives of others. Your acts of courage and faithfulness will produce a rich harvest. Your acts of love will shelter all the birds of the air. You may think it doesn't matter whether or not you read to your child, but it does. You may think it doesn't matter whether or not you share your faith with your spouse, but it does. You may think no one will miss you if you don't help at the soup kitchen, but they will. You may think that forgiving the person who has wronged you the most won't make any difference, but it will. Jesus says it will make all the difference in the world.