Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

June 17, 2017

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SMALL BEGINNINGS Ezekiel 17:22–25

Mark 4:26–34

Let us hear those two little parables once again:

. . . “The kingdom of God is as if someone would

scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and

rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and

grow, he does not know how. The earth produces

of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full

grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at

once he goes in with his sickle, because the

harvest has come.”

. . . “With what can we compare the kingdom of

God, or what parable shall we use for it? It 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.”

—Mark 4:26–32

There is something about these parables that goes against the cultural grain. Those who live in the American cultural context have a difficult time understanding them. For our culture is a “do it yourself culture.” If you want to get ahead, you have to work for it. If you want to win a war on terrorism, you must become interventionist. Idle hands are the devil’s workshop. The early bird gets the worm. We could go on and on, but you surely get the point. There is something about our culture that is incompatible with passivity of any kind, or even patience.

Yet, here in the Gospel of Mark, we have these little parables suggesting that all we human beings are called to do is to sow the seed, and then be patient, allowing God to do God’s work. We sow the seed, and then just sleep and rise night and day, until the full grain appears. No cultivation of the ground is called for in the parable. There is no fertilizer to be applied; no pesticides to be administered. There is to be no human intervention. All that we are called to do is to plant the seed, and lo and behold, in due time, the harvest is ready. In due time, the ripened grain appears. In due time, the little mustard seed, the tiniest of all seeds, becomes a huge, immense shrub, so large that birds can nest in its shade.

The kingdom of God is like that. It can begin as simply as the sowing of a seed. From that small beginning, the Kingdom may one day flourish, in God’s good time.

I am wondering whether or not we will ever be able to learn from these parables, so enamored are we with activism, American style. Culturally bound, we begin to speak and act as though the Kingdom of God were up to us. No wonder we are so restless and anxious, most of the time. We simply do not trust the Spirit to do her work any further than we can look.

I am reminded of Wendell Berry’s wonderful poem, *The Peace of Wild Things.* It goes like this:

*When despair for the world grows in me*

*and I wake in the night at the least sound*

*in fear of what my life and my children’s lives*

*may be,*

*I go and lie down where the wood drake*

*rests in his beauty on the water, and the*

*great heron feeds.*

*I come into the peace of wild things*

*who do not tax their lives with forethought*

*of grief. I come into the presence of still water.*

*And I feel above me the day-blind stars*

*waiting with their light. For a time*

*I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

Would that we find the grace to rest and be patient, and let God do God’s work, trusting that God’s kingdom will come and all that God intends will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Chad Myers, in his wonderful commentary on Mark’s Gospel, says that these two little parables call for revolutionary patience. God seeks to carry out a revolution in the world, a revolution we call the Kingdom of God, a revolution of justice and peace and compassion. That revolution was part and parcel of the life and ministry of Jesus the Christ. The little parables call us to place our trust and our hope in that revolution. They ask us to trust that God’s realm will be on day fulfilled in the earth. All we need to do is to engage in small beginnings, like planting a seed, and then be patient. In God’s good time, the harvest will come and the mustard seed will become a shrub, so large that birds will be able to nest in its branches.

About that mustard plant, let us understand that it was a landowner’s nightmare. No landowner would want such a shrub in his fields. No landowner would want an abundance of birds feeding on seeds he has sown. Here is what Pliny the Elder wrote about the mustard plant in his encyclopedic *Natural History:*

Mustard . . . with its pungent taste and fiery effect

is extremely beneficial for the health. It grows

entirely wild, though it is improved by being

transplanted: but on the other hand when it has

been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place

free of it, as the seed when it falls generates at

once.

The Kingdom of God is like that. From a small beginning it has a “take over” quality. Some have suggested that the poor peasants, who were under the oppressive thumb of large, ruthless landowners, were filled with hope when they heard this parable.

I’m not sure what might come to your minds when you think of small beginnings, but here are some events and movements that come to my mind. I think of Rosa Parks who refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, which sparked the Civil Rights Movement. I think of Nelson Mandela and the moment he was imprisoned in South Africa because of his resistance to apartheid. His imprisonment provided the inspiration for the black population of South Africa to continue their struggle for justice until apartheid came to an end. I think of Myles Yoshida, Hung Wai Ching, and John Burns, who, as friends, took the small steps necessary, one by one, to persuade the United States Government not to send the vast majority of Japanese Americans to mainland concentration camps following the attack on Pearl Harbor. I think of those Parkland High School students who have initiated a nationwide effort to end gun violence and who are now conducting a national voter registration drive aimed at young people and encouraging them to engage in the political process. I think of Senator Jeff Markley who was barred from entering a migrant detention center in Brownsville, Texas, and who is largely responsible for shedding light on the inhumane practice of separating migrant children from their parents. Some 11,000 children of migrants from Central American countries are now in detention centers in the U. S. Senator Markley is largely responsible for bringing this injustice to the attention of our nation.

This is how the Kingdom of God comes. From small beginnings, movements of peace and justice take hold in the earth.

I think also of the history of our own congregation. From small beginnings, look at what happened. Members of this congregation were largely responsible for the establishment of the Nu‘uanu YMCA, Kuakini Hospital, the Japanese Women’s Rescue Home, and Home for Neglected Children. Just think of what blossomed from small beginnings.

And so, my sisters and brothers, in a time when the world is in a sorry state, in a time when we can easily become fearful, in a time when we are losing hope and sinking into despair, in a time when we are concerned for the future of our children and grandchildren, in a time when we worry about the future of our congregation, let us pay attention to these little parables of the kingdom. Let us remember that it is *God’s* Kingdom. We may sow the seed, but it is God who brings about the growth.

These little parables invite us to place our trust and faith and hope in the future God has in store for us and for those who will come after us. The only thing required of us is to sow the seed, to do that which is good and pleasing in the sight of God. With the Psalmist, let us remember that a thousand years in the sight of God are like yesterday when it is past or like a watch in the night. And let us remember the words of with Martin Luther King Jr.: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”

So let us be patient with God and with one another, even as we sow the seed and be satisfied with small new beginnings. The rest we leave up to God. Amen.