

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Third Sunday after Pentecost – June 14, 2015
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Mark 4:26-34

FOR REFLECTION

A populace never rebels from passion for attack,
but from impatience of suffering.

- Edmund Burke, British diplomat (1729-1797)

Revolutionaries do not make revolutions.
The revolutionaries are those who know when power is
lying in the street and then they can pick it up.

- Hannah Arendt, German-born
American political scientist (1906-1975)

Mustard

Last week we looked at the possibility that Jesus was crazy.
This week we will look at the possibility that Jesus was a subversive cynic.
And keep in mind – these are not random explorations. These are possibilities raised
by the texts we are reading – and they are some of the main reasons I still call myself a
Christian aka member of the Jesus Movement.

Speaking of which, I have a question for you.
If you consider yourself a Christian, I want to know why you are still a Christian.
I don't want to hear about how you BECAME a Christian or DISCOVERED you were
Christian after being raised in the church.
I want to know why – at THIS STAGE IN YOUR LIFE – you have chosen to continue to
BE a Christian.

In 1994 I received my first (and only) sabbatical after serving five years as an
Associate Minister.
Having been previously disillusioned by some rather important aspects of Outdoor
Ministry at Pilgrim Pines –
having been disappointed by what seemed to me at the time to be a social club
atmosphere at my parish –
having been put on trial by Christians who thought I was a lesbian and believed that to
be a crime –

I was ready to leave the Institution of the Church in the dust.
I was ready to convert back to my grandfather's childhood Judaism –
or take up Pagan practices –
or just blow off religion altogether and work for Tree People –
or make quilts or be an archivist for the City of Los Angeles –
ANYTHING but pretend to believe in a G-d that sanctioned classism and bigotry and
habitual offerings of coffee and cookies and judgment.

But my church – unaware of the mutiny and judgment in my heart - gave me a
sabbatical – bless their hearts.

And I spent two weeks taking classes at Pacific School of Religion on Holy Hill in
Berkeley. One of those classes was taught by a member of The Jesus Seminar, a
relatively new phenomenon influencing popular religious discourse in America.
A group of 200 + scholars gathered twice a year to present research papers and vote
on whether or not particular gospel texts were likely to reflect the original person of
Jesus – or, instead, carry the ideology and atmosphere of a later person or community.
They published, created controversy and, in many ways, put Jesus back into
dinnertime conversation in this country.

And it was the Jesus Seminar class that kept me from leaving ministry, leaving
Christianity, becoming a biker babe – which may or may not have been a blessing.

The Mustard Seed parable was one of two texts that convinced me to stay in the
Church.

As a child – a preacher's kid, of course – I was given a necklace with a clear plastic
pendant containing a mustard seed – and, I suppose, expected to catch the meaning.
At the time I thought it was like Jack's magic beans – a seed that would grow into a
ladder-like stalk that I could climb to magnificent places.

Later, I connected the seed to a story told to me in Sunday school – about faith in G-d
being like that seed – a seed that grows over time into a giant tree where birds of
understanding and trust and meaning could make their home.

It was a popular interpretation of a popular parable – perpetuated by the ways in which
it happened to be recorded in the Bible in a variety of forms.

Many years later, this interpretation – thin by the standards of a mind raised on The
Narnia Chronicles – was given context and depth for me by 200 scholars intent on
resurrecting the real Jesus from the ashes of institutionalization.

Apparently scholarship shows that Jesus – the man Jesus – was not a condescending teacher intent on bringing innocent souls to a belief that he himself was G-d, the only conduit for spiritual salvation.

Jesus was much more interested in the social and economic causes of poverty and suffering in his communities – and the reasons why his religious institution seemed to be contributing more to the problem than to the solution.

The earliest texts, written closest to the time of his life – and the historical realities of Jesus' time and culture – lead scholars to believe that Jesus was a reformer, a challenger of the status quo – an idea close to the heart of this congregation.

Some liken him to the Greek Cynics who protested corruption through symbolic action and street theatre.

(Some of you may remember stories of Diogenes – Greek philosopher who lived around 400 bce – and walked the city streets in broad daylight with a lighted lamp – searching fruitlessly for one honest man.)

Jesus made many of his points through exaggeration and stories that turned expectations upside down. There was a long held tradition of metaphor comparing Israel to a mighty, noble, towering Cedar Tree planted by G-d upon a hill where beasts and birds could find shelter.

Thus says the Lord G-d: "I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar, and will set it out; I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it upon a high and lofty mountain; on the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bring forth boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar, and under it will dwell all kinds of beasts; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest." - Ezekiel 17:22-23

It was reported in very early writings, like Q and the Gospel of Thomas, that when asked about a metaphor for The Kingdom of G-d, Jesus said, "It's like a teeny, tiny little seed that grows into a mighty shrub where birds will nest." (Gospel of Thomas 10:1-2)

His parody of the mighty Cedar would have brought laughter – and a realization that G-d's intentions are not empire but simple community.

One of the worst problems of the time was land use – ownership by a few – leaving the majority hungry and at their mercy. (Does this sound at all familiar?) Those who could work and were lucky enough to be hired – labored in the fields and were given wages to buy some food or a portion of the harvest to take home.

The poorest and most disabled were supposedly allowed to glean food from the fields once harvest was over.

And landowners were SUPPOSED to leave enough there for the poor to glean – but didn't necessarily follow this social/religious practice which we now call "trickle-down economics."

Some of the Jesus Seminar scholars not only found this Mustard Seed parable to be a parody, they found it to be a subversive text.

Mustard is a pervasive weed, difficult to control and impossible to eradicate once it gets into a field.

It DOES attract birds – which are a nuisance when growing crops – eating seeds and shoots and fruit – hence the development of scarecrows and other anti-bird weaponry. But more than that, the mustard plant chokes out crops and renders land unusable – especially in a time before the invention of herbicides.

It is the contention of some members of the Seminar that this parable was a warning and a call to subversion.

Landowners, by virtue of their wealth – a BLESSING from G-D – had the responsibility to care for those less fortunate.

And if they refused to live up to this sacred responsibility, then it was up to the poor to level the playing field by sowing mustard seed in with the crops.

The seed is small, easily carried in large quantities in pockets – easily distributed through holes in one's clothing or carelessly by hand.

The lesson for landowners – "Share or Beware."

The lesson for the working poor – "Stand up for your rights and remember that a little bit of power goes a long way."

And the lesson for us – thousands of years later –

in an era of irreversible Economic Globalization –

in this time of Profound Prosperity in a few countries for a few people –

and Savage Inequalities – unparalleled poverty for many countries and most people – the lesson for us is that "trickle-down economics" STILL isn't working.

A progressive income tax structure meant to redistribute wealth has been dismantled. Philanthropy from corporate giants and well-developed nations is the exception rather than the norm.

Because wealth is not trickling down, poor people are migrating to wealthier nations to glean what they can and survive – and are coming up against literal walls and criminalization for not having certain documents regarding their immigrant status.

Corporations like WAL MART are forcing themselves into communities around the world – building warehouses of products made by people in foreign countries who are not paid a living wage – putting local small businesses out of work by under-pricing these goods – paying American laborers less than a living wage and zero health

benefits – placing the burden of making up the income difference and the health costs on the welfare system and middle income tax payers who are doing our best to redistribute enough to keep everyone alive.

And the question we might ask as Christians is – what would Jesus recommend in this situation?

We could wander the streets in broad daylight with a lit lamp looking for one honest person... maybe not as effective as it was in 400 bce.

We might also:

Remind the world of basic human rights given by G-d – to food, clothing and shelter...

Expect and solicit philanthropy from corporations and wealthy individuals...

Demand a Jubilee Year and the forgiveness of unpayable debts...

Tear down walls and fences rather than build them...

Establish ways to reliably care for those whose needs are greater than ours...

Unionize workers who are otherwise rendered powerless in negotiation...and support the unions that exist under fire...

Stop the incessant incarceration and murder of people of color in this country...

Demand sanctions and economic legislation that will level the playing field (certainly NOT the Pan-Pacific Trade Agreement)...

And when those who hoard resources refuse to share, resort to subversive tactics – boycott products and companies, go on strike, plant insidious shrubbery and the will to resist injustice.

There you have it – The Mustard Seed – Ta Da! –

the catalyst for the reawakening my Christian identity and my remaining in the Church. Here is a message and a man I can follow with my whole heart and mind and sense of fair play.

Here is evidence of a G-d that makes sense to me, challenges me and loves me/trusts me enough to give me serious responsibilities toward other humans and my planet.

Here is the small empowering seed that overtakes my heart and motivates my life work.

So, why are you – if you are – still and now – a Christian?

What motivates your life's work?

What gives breath and life to your deepest values?

Why are you here this morning?

Make sure there's a reason –
and make it a good one.

There's work to be done!

Mark 4:26-34

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

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

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

Thus says the Lord G-d: "I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar, and will set it out; I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it upon a high and lofty mountain; on the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bring forth boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar, and under it will dwell all kinds of beasts; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest."

- Ezekiel 17:22-23

The disciples said to Jesus, "Tell us what the kingdom of Heaven is like." He said to them, "It is like a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds. But when it falls on tilled soil, it produces a great plant and becomes a shelter for birds of the sky."

- Gospel of Thomas 10:1-2

And he said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of G-d, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of 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."

- Gospel of Mark 4:30-32

[6/18/06]