
Trees, Parables and Retirement

Homily for the Second Sunday after Pentecost

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The Cathedral of St. Philip, Atlanta

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In seminary we were taught how to preach a three-point sermon. Today I want to talk about three things: trees, parables, and retirement.

Do you remember this poem by Joyce Kilmer that you probably learned in school?

I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.

A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the sweet earth's loving breast.

A tree that looks at God all day
And lifts her leafy arms to pray.

A tree that may in summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair.

Upon whose bosom snow has lain;
Who ultimately lives with rain.

Poems are made by fools like me;
But only God can make a tree.

I grew up on a farm across the road from a state park, where the foliage was dense and where birds and rabbits and deer frolicked safely. When my parents bought the place when I was about eight, they not only needed to rebuild the old 19th century farmhouse, but decided to plant as many trees as they could. They planted a new orchard, and trees by the lake, ornamental trees and great giant maples. When my mother sold the farm five years ago, she handed over her legacy to a new young family, who would continue what she and father had begun. Mom just celebrated her 88th birthday last Saturday and Jim and I had a wonderful visit with her in her new home. She is still surrounded by beautiful trees and tends her garden with care and delight. When I moved to Atlanta eight years ago I was immediately struck by our magnificent tree line, and the abundance of foliage, now verdant with this year's wonderful rains. It's good to be green again.

In today's Gospel passage, Jesus speaks in parables" again. He used this literary device frequently to get his point across, and in this passage from Mark, we hear that Jesus preached only in parables "as they were able to hear." Parables are brief stories that illustrate a particular religious or moral construct" that communicate universal truths. Parables are a kind of extended metaphor" one way of grasping the amazing wonder that is God within the limits of human language.

In today's Gospel we hear two seed parables which remind us that small things can and do make a big difference. Parables are like spiritual telescopes that bring the gospel message into focus and challenge us to dig deeper in our search for truth. Unlike the mystery of the Holy Trinity or even of love, parables help us to ask the right questions, and bring us closer to our true nature and to our relationship to God's kingdom.

The language of the parable is the language of faith at work in our everyday lives. They are about everything from seeds and shrubs to lost coins and wasted money. They are about the things of this life considered as means of grace and growth. They are about the kingdom within.

The kingdom is the key. Jesus does not say for instance that we ourselves are like the mustard seed, which though small "grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs." On the contrary, left to our own devices most of us would probably remain stuck in our own comfort zone. We would not have the grace to live and grow into the life of the kingdom. It is rather the kingdom working within us that is the source of all we can become.

The parable of the mustard seed, certainly familiar to all of us, highlights the contrast between the smallness of the seed and the magnificence of the shrub it becomes. Forgiving the horticultural overstatement about the mustard seed being the smallest seed, Jesus' point is that the reign of God, although it begins in obscurity, limited scope and apparent insignificance, will reach a majestic fulfillment. It will attract attention and offer refuge, just as a large mustard plant can shelter birds.

The image of the tree in this parable has much to teach us about the reign of God. It reminds us that God does truly work in mysterious ways, and that divine power is not always obvious. It may come in a very tiny form, it can move in all kinds of directions, and it can be delightfully unpredictable. The work of the Holy Spirit, which is God's presence working within the church today, can still produce significant results.

The kind of kingdom Jesus describes, however, is just that: it is a kingdom in which the members have choice, the free will to make decisions about their lives, their involvement, their direction and their future. The test for any religious community or church is whether each of us is growing in our faith, and showing forth God's love and compassion in the world. I am beginning to think that is the only criteria that matters.

Finally, a couple of words about retirement. As many of you know, I officially retired from full-time ministry last September, and the Dean then rehired me to work part-time at the Cathedral, as an associate in pastoral care. Much of what I do is what I've done here for the past seven years—"visitation of the sick and shut-in, services at retirement homes and being available for counsel and direction. The best part is that I am no longer required to attend meetings or have administrative responsibility. And even though the transition has gone rather smoothly, I am reminded by this quote of Anatole France, the French writer. All changes, even the most longed for, have their melancholy; for what we leave behind is part of ourselves we must die to one life before we can enter into another.

As someone who truly enjoyed being the Rector of a parish and Dean of a Cathedral, I must admit that it is sometimes a challenge to play second or even fifth fiddle! The melancholy, however, is not merely in having very little power or authority. It is the fact that I no longer have the opportunity to shape ministry in the way I once did. For me church is almost always local, and the best part of parish life for me was watching congregations grow into the kind of places that were welcoming, rich with diversity and courageous in mission. The best part of my new ministry is that I am still able to interact with people's lives, and hopefully be a pastoral and loving presence in times of illness, distress or death. The other keen awareness for me is that although I served and loved the church for 35 years, my existence and joy as a human being was never measured in titles or credentials, but primarily in relationships—with people, with creativity in the arts, and with the world around me. Thanks be God, those relationships seem to be flourishing in this new venture called semi-retirement, and I look forward to many more years here in this vineyard with you, being refreshed by the tree lines, and watching your mustard seeds grow.

So let us continue to walk by faith, not by sight, with confidence. For the love of Christ urges us on. Everything old has passed away, and in Christ there is a new creation. Let us rejoice and be glad.

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