

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

June 14, 2009

Proper 6

In the name of our one living, ever creating, ever redeeming, ever sustaining God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures is the start of a great narrative – the story of King David and his relationship with God. We will be following this story for the next several weeks. Here, we find that God is sorry that he made Saul King in the first place and has changed his mind. He calls Samuel the prophet and tells him to go to Jesse the Bethlehemite and to bring his horn of oil because “I have provided myself a king from among his sons.” Samuel is no fool. He knows what will happen if Saul finds out that he has anointed a second, rival, king. God tells him to be crafty – to take a heifer with him so people will believe him when he tells them the reason for his trip is to offer sacrifice.

Samuel has Jesse parade his sons before him – each more handsome and strapping than the next. Surely this is the one, Samuel thinks each time -- and God rejects all them. How can this be, Samuel wonders, and asks if Jesse has any other sons. Told that the youngest is out minding the sheep, Samuel tells Jesse to send for him. When he arrives, God tells Samuel that this is the one and to anoint him king of Israel. Anointed, the spirit of God came mightily on David from that day forward.

This story sets up the coming story David and Saul and David’s eventual rise to power. It also contains a common theme found in the Bible – that of reversal of human expectations. Here God sends Jesse to the least important area of the smallest tribe of Israel.

Now he selects as king the youngest, smallest and least important son of a pretty insignificant family. It is a provocative start to a compelling story. What kind of God is this? Apparently a God who is engaged in Creation, a God able to change God's mind when God's plan is frustrated and a God who defies our expectations.

Jesus strikes the same note in the parables he tells in today's Gospel reading. They are very short and deal with the stuff of his listeners' everyday lives. Now parables are meant to grab the listener's curiosity. They usually have something surprising in them designed to get the listener thinking. There is no right answer and the answer we come up with has as much to do about where we are coming from – our expectations – as the story itself. Maybe that is the point – to make us aware of how we see things and wonder about other ways of seeing things. It is a conversation opener.

The first story likens the kingdom of God to a man who casts seeds on the ground and then basically lays about doing nothing. The seed sprouts; the man doesn't know how, and it seems to grow on its own. When the grain is ripe, he goes at once into the field with his sickle because the harvest has come. What is the story about? Is it a story about end times and final judgment or is it a story about God as the power of life, and the inevitability of life springing forth from previously harvested grain? Is the kingdom about end times and judgmental God or is it about God's grace infused in every living thing as containing within itself the promise of continuing abundant life? If the former, the kingdom of God is off in the future; if it is the latter, the kingdom of God is here now. Could it be both?

The story about the kingdom of God being like mustard seed that gets planted as the smallest of all seeds but grows up to be the greatest of all shrubs putting out branches for the birds to nest in its shade would really get Jesus' listeners wondering. "What in the world is that about?" they would be wondering. Everybody knows that no one plants a mustard seed. It grows where it will and spreads everywhere out of control. It's a pest. The greatest of all shrubs with

birds nesting in its shade? That's a good one, they'd think. It's a scrawny shrub that attracts birds exactly where you don't want them – in your fields eating your crops.!

It is an image of the spontaneity of the Kingdom of God and the inevitability of the kingdom of God. It contains within it the vitality of new life and it will grow where it will and is uncontrollable. It defies our human expectations and grows even where it is not wanted.

Jesus often used images of “little things” , inconsequential to most people, to describe how the kingdom of God worked: a mustard seed, a cup of water, a lost coin, the kindness done to the least of these. The kingdom is described not in grand terms but in terms of common, everyday life. It has a life of its own and it defies our expectations and it is there in our midst if only we look. God's kingdom is planted in our hearts and it has a sense of inevitability about it.

I think of the slave masters who talked up heaven as a way to keep the enslaved quiet and acquiescent. But all that talk about Heaven and the good things God had waiting for them there taught them a lesson the slave owners didn't expect: that God wants for them something better than the present reality! The faith within them was like a planted seed. It gave generations the ability to endure with dignity while resisting in any way possible the current oppression. God's vindication of Jesus gave them heart to endure to a day when as Jesus prayed, “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” The seed planted by Jesus was a seed of new life and was and is passed down blowing through the world like the mustard seeds..

It was in Frederick Douglass to be nurtured by news of the abolition movement. It sustained people during Jim Crow days and blossomed in the hearts of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and others when they saw it in the heart of Mohatmas Gandhi and recognized that his words could bear fruit here. It grew where people didn't want it to be and it upended expectations. When Dr. King preached the words “I have a dream than my four little children will be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character,” I don't think that even he

could foresee the election of an African American as President.

We see this popping up in all cultures and times – the suffrage movement and the start of women’s equal rights, the Stonewall riot and the start of equal rights for gay and lesbian people, the independence movements in Europe’s former colonies.

The kingdom of God is within each and every one of us. Think about your own lives and those close to you and examine how the promise of growth and new life sustains us in difficult times and stays to produce shoots and the flowers and then seeds that are carried elsewhere. As our reading from Second Corinthians teaches us, we have within us a faith that does not deny the realities of pain, hardships, suffering and injustice. But it is a faith that sustains us with the knowledge that the present reality is not the final reality.

The kingdom of God is like a seed buried deep within each and every person. It is the sense of the wholeness of us as children of God and our desire to be free and to reach our greatest hopes. We have to let it grow as we let our inner nature come forth as we shed dead outer husk. When we do that we bring new life into the world and confound the world’s expectations.

The kingdom of God will spread to places where it is not wanted and will be opposed. There will be suffering and pain, but like the mustard seeds, it will eventually take over. “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Amen.