

Sermon: The World is My Parish

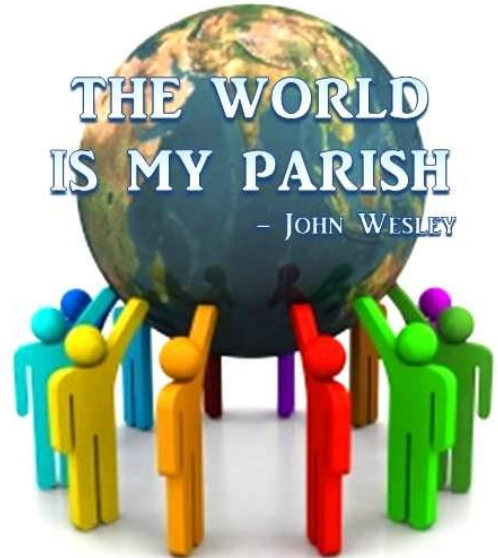
(Sound of a drum...then singing):

*Bless Sophia! Dream the vision;
Share the Wisdom dwelling deep within!*

(3x)

(Sound of a drum...)

This song comes out of the Reimagining, a conference of the World Council of Church's Ecumenical Decade: Churches in Solidarity with Women. "The purpose was to bring together female theologians, ordained clergy and lay people, to do theological work born out of women's experience." We began each presentation of the conference by standing, raising our hands in blessing and singing the song with which I begin my sermon today. We prayed the blessing of wisdom on all our presenters—and were blessed with the gift of wisdom in ourselves.



Six years ago I sang this blessing song before you on the Sunday I preached my first sermon in this congregation. I shared with you some of what had helped to shape me into the person and preacher I am today and as a reminder that theological work is *everybody's* work, and that the word "liturgy" means "the work of the people." Today I sing this blessing to remind us of the presence of the Holy Spirit blowing among us, connecting us in the work that we do in the name of God—wherever we find ourselves.

This congregation is filled with people who know what it is like to speak your faith with authenticity. You know the value of naming and claiming God in ways that speak to your hearts; you understand that personal faith leads to faithful action in the world. I am grateful that you have journeyed with me over these years, working together, studying together, and sharing the love of God that brings God's wisdom to birth in our own lives and in the lives of others.

(Sound of a drum...then singing):

*Bless Sophia! Dream the vision;
Share the Wisdom dwelling deep within! (3x)*

(Sound of a drum...)

Today we have the opportunity to hear some of the parables in the Gospel of Mark; stories, yeah! In very quick succession, we have the story of scattered seed... followed by the parable of the mustard seed; or as one commentator imaginatively suggests, we have: Gradual Growth, Sleeper Sower, and Mischievous Mustard (Reid 1999:61). I really like that alliteration of Mischievous Mustard, so we shall begin there.

When I was a little girl, I was given a necklace. It was a tear-shaped glass bead, no more than a half-inch in size. Inside the glass bead was water, and floating in the water (magnified by the water), was a grain of mustard seed. The gift box told the story of this parable, suggesting that the tiny mustard seed (the smallest of all seeds) grows into the greatest of all shrubs. For the longest time, I believed that to be true; it was a quote from the Bible, after all. However, I now know that botanically speaking, mustard does not grow to be the greatest of all shrubs, nor is it the smallest of all seeds; Jesus is using "hyperbole...to drive home the contrast" (Reid 1999:68).

What I also did not recognize is that wild mustard is considered to be a pesky weed, and is almost impossible to get rid of once it has infested a field or vegetable garden. In some places, when a space has been taken over by mustard bushes the land is declared to be unclean. Interesting. Just what is it that Jesus is trying to tell us when he proclaims the Kingdom of God to be like a growing mustard seed?

Robert Funk and the Jesus Seminar suggest that: “Jesus’ audience would probably have expected God’s domain to be compared to something great, not something small” (*Funk 1993:59*). Funk then adds: As the tradition was passed on, it fell under the influence...or Rome where the mighty cedar of Lebanon was used as a metaphor for a towering empire... In his use of this metaphor, Jesus chooses the image of something very small for comic effect” (*Funk 1993: 484*).

Either way, Funk says, the parable of the Mustard Seed “betrays an underlying sense of humor on Jesus’ part” (*Funk 1993:485*). Other scholars suggest that Jesus deliberately chose the symbol of the weed and its seed to represent the poor, the tax collectors, and the sinners: they are pesky intrusions into the ordered garden of society” (*Funk 1993:60*).

So there we have it; Jesus tells us a parable about a pesky weed that can take over everything and proclaims that this is what we can expect the reign of God to look like. Out of control mustard bushes are a far cry from streets of gold OR halls of mercy in my mind. But that element of surprise is what makes this story a parable.

But even for a parable, the analogy is rather strange. The story comes to represent two very different groups. The first group is the Roman Empire with all of its armies and senators and other levels of governance; the second group is made up of the undesirables, the nuisances and nobodies (*Crossan 1991:276-79*).

The story plot unfolds: Chapter 1: ‘We are here for the duration,’ said pompous Rome. ‘Stay in your place and we will let you live. Misbehave and you will end up like all these blokes.’

Chapter 2 follows: ‘We aren't going away either,’ said the undesirables. ‘There is a new kingdom coming and it is already breaking through.’

Remembering that the original ‘Jesus people’ or ‘Followers of the Way’ were not a formal gathered community, we hear Chapter 3: they – the undesirables - begin to organize. And the collection of Easter stories that we find in the Gospels were their way of saying: “This new kingdom is an anti-empire run by an un-king. Its way is peace through justice, and justice through non-violence. Its royal court consists of poets and crazy minstrels who think the poor should be filled with good things. The un-king's army is a band of off-key resisters who keep getting in the way as they sing for peace. “Don't look for this new upside-down world in heaven. It is right here, right now, within and without us. Anyone who is ever left out, despised, rejected, forgotten, spit on, looked over, stood up, washed up, or left behind is in the un-king's cabinet” (*JShuck. ‘Easter for the non-religious. Shuck & Juve blog site, 2009*).

Mark the storyteller asks: ‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?’ Well, now **we’ve** heard the story, there are a few other questions **we** need to ask: Where is God’s reign to be found? With what kind of power is it established? Who brings it? Who stands to gain by its coming? Whose power is threatened by it? Commentator Barbara Reid, rather eloquently, suggests that: “The reign of God does not have to be imported from far-away... nor does it come with an impressive power. Rather, it is found in every back yard, erupting out of unpretentious ventures of faith by unimportant people – but which have potentially world-transforming power” (*Reid 1999:69*).

Unpretentious ventures and unimportant people...who spend their Saturdays preparing meals for the hungry, who repair or build homes for our poorest sisters and brothers, who care for broken, hurting, and diseased bodies, who calm troubled minds, who risk their lives to protect the vulnerable, and who boldly speak truth to power on behalf of healthcare, immigration, and equal rights (*Shuck & Juve blog site, 2009*). This is the Kingdom of God.

(*Sound of a drum...then singing*):

Bless Sophia! Dream the vision;

Share the Wisdom dwelling deep within! (3x)

(Sound of a drum...)

John Wesley was ordained by the Church of England to be a priest of the Kingdom; but he was problematic. He wouldn't stay in a single pulpit and was often told that he couldn't preach in Kingdom churches. So, he took the good news of the Gospel to the people on the highways and by-ways, in mines and city centers. And when he was challenged and chastised, he proclaimed that "The World is My Parish," claiming that his ordination was to God's Kingdom, the whole realm of God. The people named Methodist have continued to claim that to this very day.

Final sermons are difficult to write and preach, because if I am doing my job right, it is not all about me. When I first got here, I was amazed at how well the people of this congregation lived out the call to social holiness; I wondered to myself just what I had to teach in this place. I thank you for sharing your passion and wisdom with me, and allowing me to share mine with you, as we have continued to grow together. I hope that John Wesley would be pleased with how we have all embraced the concept of the world as our parish. I pray that the work we have done here—and the work that will continue to be done—will always be done to the honor and glory of God through Jesus the Christ.

Unpretentious ventures and unimportant people...serving the neighborhoods of University Place...New Visions Community...Lincoln, NE...and the entire world; the world is my parish. The world is your parish as well. Mischievous Mustard grows wild and spreads beyond the boundaries of any garden in which it is planted. The Kingdom of God has been set loose in the world. May it keep growing...

(Sound of a drum...then singing):

Bless Sophia! Dream the vision;

Share the Wisdom dwelling deep within! (3x)

(Sound of a drum...)

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Notes:

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