

June 14, 2015 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

Remembering Who We Are in Times of Change and Transition

Ezekiel 17:22-24 / Psalm 92:1-4, 12-15 / 2 Corinthians 16-20 / Mark 4:26-34

In the months ahead, before I actually leave in retirement, I want to take Sunday mornings as a time when we remember and re-center on who we are as a community. I think the contemporary word is reset. The seed vision given to this community sixty years ago is still at the heart of who we are. In times of transition like this, we need to remember the vision. It is not a time to rush into action or a flurry of anxious thoughts, but to quiet ourselves inwardly, individually, and together. It is time to be at peace, and recall the things that have marked the life of this community through the years. We are a community founded upon the belief that we really can live the life of faith, inwardly and outwardly. We really can grow in our capacity to live trustfully, knowing that we already have everything we need for fullness of life and will be given all that is needed for the ministries to which we are called.

So I ask you to join me, over the next months, in touching base with who we are, our essence, as a community of faith and how it all works. It isn't easy stuff! Someone just this past week was saying that he was trying to explain to others what the Church of the Covenant is about and how it works. He said, You know, it's really difficult to explain. After these years with you, it is still hard for me to explain it to others. It usually comes down to, Well, you have to experience it, work with it. It is something we live into through commitment. It is a way of life, the life of following Jesus, recovering our true humanity, the persons God created us to be.

Paul wrote to the community in Corinth in the middle of the first century that because of Jesus, we no longer look at others or ourselves or the world in the same way. We are a "new creation". We begin to see life in terms of God's presence in us and the world, always bringing about reconciliation, the healing of life, the harmonizing of humanity with the purposes of God—compassion, justice, peace, love. We become persons through whom God is appealing to the world to be reconciled, to become whole. God's presence expresses itself in human beings in the life of love.

This is what we are about as we work with the inward journey and the outward journey. The inward journey is the inward work we do—silence, prayer, study, reflection,

growing in self-awareness, giving attention to our lives in their relationship with God. As we make that inward journey more and more central to our lives, we find ourselves becoming new people. We awaken to ourselves as those loved by God, the power and source of life. We ourselves begin to be reconciled, become more whole and less fragmented and distracted. The outward journey is how we live to meet some need, to nurture and nourish life around us, through the diverse ways God calls us and the gifts God gives us to share. To me, that is the meaning of Paul's words, that in Christ we are a new creation, and God is appealing to the world through us.

This is a way of speaking about what “membership” in the Church of the Covenant is about. It is committing ourselves, in community with others, to the journey of being who we truly are, giving our lives a certain form or shape through simple spiritual practices that help us go deeper and blossom more fully. And very important to all of this is giving attention to the small, the near, the little things. That is where the parables for today come in. They are part of the way we see everything in a different way when we are on the inward and outward journeys of our life in relation to God.

Amy-Jill Levine is Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School and University. She describes herself as a “Yankee Jewish feminist who teaches in a predominantly Christian divinity school in the buckle of the Bible Belt.” Her scholarship opens up in fresh ways the meanings of Jesus' life and teachings in the context of Judaism. After all, Jesus never saw himself as anything other than a Jew!

In her book, Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi, Levine writes: “The crowds...needed to find their own understandings(of the parables), and we too must find ours.” “Each reader will hear a distinct message and may find that the same parable leaves multiple impressions over time.” The parables have a “surplus of meaning”, not just one meaning or one truth or one message. In *Children Worship & Wonder*, the parables are told flat on the floor, because we do not know how deep parables are. “What makes the parables mysterious, or difficult, is that they challenge us to look into the hidden aspects of our own values, our own lives.” The parables do not allow us to “proclaim a creed” out of them, but instead they lead to “prompting a conversation or pursuing a call”. To me, Jesus' parables function much like the *koans* of Buddhism (after all, Jesus taught in an Eastern, not a Western style.) They shake up our thinking so that we have to see things in a new way. Jesus' parables are meant to open up in us new ways of seeing ourselves and life around us. Their meaning is dynamic, not static. The two little parables for today are about the mysterious presence and growth of God's kingdom, the working of God's purposes in the

world and in our own lives. And I think they speak meaningfully to us as a community at this moment.

Someone scatters seed on the ground, sleeps and rises day by day, and the seed sprouts and grows. The sower has no idea how it happens. The sower does not sow the seed and then hover over it, prodding it into growth. The seed's nature is to grow. It's life is inherent and will grow in its own time and its own way. When the growth is complete, then sower goes in to harvest the produce.

Amy-Jill Levine suggests that the sowing is done in the nearby garden or field. “The kingdom of heaven, “ writes Levine, “is found in what today we might call 'our own backyard' in the generosity of nature and in the daily working of men and women.” From this little parable of the seed we reflect on living our lives of faith beginning with what is near, what is daily. The person right next to us. The need right in front of us. I do not think that we can know how to love humanity rightly if we cannot be in community with and learn what it means to love the persons right here. We become mindful that the growth is not ours but God's to bring about, and that there is life going on all around us, and within us, that we do not control but participate in and become part of. We sow something here or there, but we do not hover anxiously over it. Levine writes, “Sometimes we need to *get out of the way*. We are not always the focus; sometimes we are the facilitator for something bigger than ourselves.”

I found those words very helpful as I follow my decision to retire and to leave this community, my community. This small community, these small mission groups, are not mine but God's. You, as small as you may feel your life to be, are part of something big. We are all part of God's life and presence in the world, and it is our joy to find and to be our part in it, to sow whatever seeds we feel God gives us to share with others and the world around us.

That brings us finally to the parable of the mustard seed. It is surely about the mystery of something small growing into something great. Amy-Jill Levine says that the word Mark uses here for the smallness of the seed literally means “smaller”, not “smallest”. There are many seeds smaller than a mustard seed. The mustard plant referred to here is actually an invasive plant, or literally “vegetable”, that grows only about a foot high. But then Levine says that the point of parables, as with the whole of the Bible, is not about scientific accuracy. The point is a spiritual one about smaller things become amazingly and unpredictably larger things, so that they give more life to life. Again, Jesus is saying that the natural world, the creation has many, many lessons to teach us...IF we pay attention, if we are willing to learn. As a Native American prayer says, which we use at times in our worship:

“Let me learn the lessons you have hidden in every leaf and rock.” (#698 Chalice Hymnal) Or as Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, pay attention to, learn from, contemplate, the flowers in the field and the birds of the air. They can teach you to let go of your anxiousness about life and material things. (Matthew 6)

I went to the closing of Camp Jump Start on Friday, and watched the youngest of our campers, who are first timers. On Tuesday morning, I had sung with them at opening. At that age, they are like little birds, their faces turned up to you, wide open, ready to be fed, or in this case, to sing. I could see Friday what it had meant to them to have a week to be free in the woods, getting dirty and hot and tired, singing their hearts out, knowing the watchful care and love of their counselors. I sat a few minutes later in the Lodge working, and watching out the window as they left their closing circle and walked up to meet their parents. Two or three of them were thumb-sucking tired! But their faces were relaxed and happy. I talked to one of the mothers whose six-year-old was in the camp. She told me that her daughter was tired and happy every night. I am glad Jesus taught so much about the importance of being close and paying attention to and learning from the creation around us.

The kingdom, the presence, the realm of God in the world and in us and our life together is like life itself. Small things grow inexplicably into greater things. The sowing is ours, the growth is God's. As I struggle with leaving and you struggle with what it means, it feels as though now is time, for us as a community, to go back to the small things, the essence, the core. Each of us and as a community. We go back to the inward journey. If we have not yet begun a regular practice of the inward journey, or we have drifted away so that it seems once more to be difficult, we take that first little step. We sit. We breathe. We try just letting ourselves become quiet and prayerful and open. Even for five minutes. If we keep at it, it becomes, once more, like the smaller seed, growing in us as a large shrub or tree. It becomes a shelter for our whole being over time. It becomes less and less like a “discipline” or a rule, and increasingly the refuge that renews us. We find what Howard Thurman called “the Island of Peace within our souls”. If as a mission group, we have drifted too much into the outward so that we are preoccupied and filled with worries, making our life all work and little prayer, it is time to return to the seed, the original vision, to inward journey time, together quietly refocusing on the essence, the call of the group's life and mission. We remember that it is not about our making something happen, but God bringing something about through us.

Everything begins, and begins again, in smallness. I think of the Outdoor School Mission Group that has met for several years, at times with only two members. The vision was kept.

The seed of outdoor experience and learning for pre-school age children was sown in different ways. The outdoor school itself has not yet come about. However, because of the vision that was held up, that mysterious power of life has moved to bring about outdoor education for young children through Camp Kum-Ba-Yah. Elizabeth's Early Learning Center now brings its children out regularly for days in the woods. There is now one, and in the future two, outdoor classrooms created by volunteers. Teachers will be able to walk with their children on the Husky Trail, from Bedford Hills Elementary School to the outdoor classrooms, where they can sit in a circle on hewn logs, learning in and from the quiet peace of the forest.

One more picture, if you will, of the kingdom of God and how it works. Yesterday there was a group on our grounds here having a big party and celebration. It is called FAST(Families and Schools Together). There were teachers, parents, and students from several Lynchburg and surrounding area schools. A crowd of people of every color, size, shape, age, and walk of life, all working together to improve life. They swam, flew down the zip line, climbed up into the tree house, made crafts. How did this happen? By any number of people doing their little bit, tending their little part of this garden we call 4415 Boonsboro Road, the camp and church together, staff and volunteers, people past and present, who have preserved and made this a welcoming place in God's good creation. Small things and great things, and the mystery of it all.

It is all about smallness, in our own lives, in our community, in our mission groups and their ministries. The largeness may well come, and we will need to be ready for that harvest. But we are ready for big things only as we are faithful in the small things, as Jesus also taught. And we remember that the growth is not ours. It is not about pushing and controlling. The growth happens, and we know not how. But we commit ourselves to be part of it.