

Storytelling 101 - The Mustard Seed
Christ Church - 14 June 2015

Mark 4: 26-34 (CE)

6 Then Jesus said, “This is what God’s kingdom is like. It’s as though someone scatters seed on the ground, 27 then sleeps and wakes night and day. The seed sprouts and grows, but the farmer doesn’t know how. 28 The earth produces crops all by itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full head of grain. 29 Whenever the crop is ready, the farmer goes out to cut the grain because it’s harvest time.”

30 He continued, “What’s a good image for God’s kingdom? What parable can I use to explain it? 31 Consider a mustard seed. When scattered on the ground, it’s the smallest of all the seeds on the earth; 32 but when it’s planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all vegetable plants. It produces such large branches that the birds in the sky are able to nest in its shade.”

33 With many such parables he continued to give them the word, as much as they were able to hear. 34 He spoke to them only in parables, then explained everything to his disciples when he was alone with them.

Most of us love a good story....a book, a good movie, a story told over a campfire or a glass of wine. We often like one that has some good humor in it... or a positive message. We like stories that demonstrate personal transformation or a lesson learned.

Our Gospel scriptures have quite a few stories that Jesus told, called parables. A parable is a short story that teaches some truth, illustrates a religious principle, or imparts a moral lesson. Early in Mark 4, Jesus tells us that he uses parables to offer insight in a way that we can hear and understand. He also suggests that these stories might help us turn our lives around.

We have learned through the years that we don't always fully understand the intended meaning. We must enter the minds and experience of the story teller and the listeners from that time to get a clearer idea. For example, the parable of the Good Samaritan has a twist that deepens the meaning. The hearers from those times understood, but we do not. I always thought this was a simple story about how important it is to do good deeds, to help another in need. And yes, it is. But what I learned as an adult is a more powerful lesson. The Samaritans were not considered good neighbors at that time. They

... were people who lived in what had been the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Samaria, the name of that kingdom's capital, was located between Galilee in the north and Judea in the south. The Samaritans were a racially mixed society with Jewish and pagan ancestry. Although they worshiped Yahweh as did the Jews, their religion was not mainstream Judaism. They accepted only the first five books of the Bible as canonical, and their temple was on Mount Gerazim instead of on Mount Zion in Jerusalem (Jn 4:20).

The Samaritans of Jesus' day were strict monotheists. In some respects they were more strict than Jews about the commands of the Mosaic law, especially the sabbath regulations, but they did not

share the Jewish stricture against pronouncing the divine name Yahweh in their oaths.

Because of their imperfect adherence to Judaism and their partly pagan ancestry, the Samaritans were despised by ordinary Jews. Rather than contaminate themselves by passing through Samaritan territory, Jews who were traveling from Judea to Galilee or vice versa would cross over the river Jordan, bypass Samaria, and cross over the river again as they neared their destination.

People in those times were keenly aware of this, so the story of the Samaritan who assisted the man on the road to Jerusalem is especially poignant. He set aside any concerns and reservations he might have had and did the right thing, cared for a person in need. Jesus is encouraging us to put any prejudices and hesitations aside and go the extra mile.

This morning's parable is about the mustard seed.... a small seed that can grow into a significant plant. Again, this is not the mustard plant that flourishes around here and turns local fields bright yellow at spring time. Instead for our unaccustomed ears, the plant referred to in the parable is generally considered to be the black mustard, a large annual plant up to 9 feet tall, that grows from a small seed. Many interpretations of this scripture suggest a metaphor for the church, which started small with a few people following The Way, being the seeds... and grew into a large international organization.

But, I want to take a more personal view. We are each seeds to begin with, we start small. What are we growing into? What are the things that help us to become all that God wants us to be?

And this is where another story can guide us - I turn again to Father Gregory Boyle, founder of Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles that assists former gang

members to reenter their communities with hope and productivity. He shares many stories of hope in his book Tattoos on the Heart -

[Our story starts] One afternoon in the sanctuary at Dolores Mission and per usual I was late for the 5 p.m. Mass. I'm vesting as fast as I can. Speedy enters the side door. He is lanky at seventeen, rail thin but taut from being pursued by enemies all the time. He slides his two elbows on the Formica counter top and perches his chin on his fist. I'm flipping through books to find the readings for the Mass.

"You know, G," he begins, "I don't really care if I live or die." I'm embarrassed to admit it, but all I'm thinking of are the three old ladies who've been waiting for twenty minutes for the *misa* to start.

"Look, dog," I tell him, throwing a Guatemalan stole over my head, "I have to do Mass right now. It's gonna have to do for the moment for you to know that **I care** whether you live or die."

Speedy weighs this on some internal scale and things balance.

"Okay," he says, and I think the equivalent of *When*.

Three hours later, ... Speedy appears, and his mood seems elevated; he dives in.

"Look, I don't want you to get red at what I'm about to tell you." [Speedy had seen G's red-faced anger]

"Whad 'ya do?"

"Well... I walked Karla home." ...She's the girl he's currently 'sprung on'...very cute, and she lives in the midst of Speedy's worst enemies. To walk her home was to endanger both their lives.

I don't get a chance to voice my displeasure, because Speedy rapid fires the rest of the story. [He deposited Karla at home in her two story apartments...and on the way down meet up with eight members of the rival gang who chase him off. If this story had happened five years later, they would have had guns.... they didn't.]

They don't call him Speedy for nothing.

As he nears First Street and can see the safety of his barrio across the street, he bumps into Yolanda, a parish member who knows enough to realize that Speed should not be where he is. She summons him.

“*Ven, mijo. Que estas haciendo aqui:?*”

Speedy, out of breath, lowers his head.

“*Sabes que, mijo,*” she says “*Te digo una cosa.*” If anything happened to you, it would break my heart in two.” She barely knows him. “You know I've seen you playing with your nephew in the park. What a good tio you are. I've also seen you feed the homeless at the church. What a generous and good thing that is.”

“*Pero, te digo una cosa,* if anything happened to you, it would break my heart in two. Now, *vete a la casa.*”

Speedy arrives at my office, out of breath... He looks at me and smiles after telling me the tale.

“You know,” he says, tapping his heart with his finger, “that shit made me feel good.”... this tender mercy of a stranger, rubbed salve on the wounds of this kid's hopeless heart. You can almost hear the armor fall away and clank to the ground.

Not long after this, things began to change for Speedy. He began to “live his way into a new way of thinking.” He married his teenage sweetheart, Claudia. They moved away from the projects. He got work up at an oil refinery in Richmond. Several years later, I called knowing it was Claudia's birthday. I asked her, “What's your ruco got planned for you tonight?”

“Oh,” she gets quiet, “You know, money's tight...”... “Hey, you get that cheap *codo* on the phone.” Speedy takes the receiver.

“I can't believe you... I mean you can't find twenty bucks to take her out to eat, by candlelight, whisper in her ear...'*mi vida, mi reina, mi cielo, mi todo.*” [my life, my queen, my heaven, my

everything]

Speedy thinks for half a beat, “Damn, I bought her roses, what more she want?”

I can visualize Claudia, laughing and hugging her man. “The two of them falling into each other’s arms, holding on against the darkness, and witnessing together: real light, real peace.

Speedy hailed from a family broken in all the usual ways. As a kid he had to navigate alcoholism, fighting, estrangement, and inappropriateness, on top of dysfunction stacked high onto sadness. And yet, he built his own family..

One day, he’s in town, and invites me to dinner. “I’ll even pay,” he says.

At the restaurant we talk about his job, his return to school, his greater responsibilities, his leadership role at the refinery... his kids. I ask him about down time... “We begin with Mass. Then we go to Mimi’s Café. The kids can order whatever they want. Then we go to Barnes and Noble for two hours. “You know my cheap ass is not going to buy books.” We all go to our separate corners and read in their comfortable chairs.

“The kids did beg me to buy the new Harry Potter, so what the hell. I broke down and bought it. Every night, I sit in my recliner, we turn off the TV, and my three kids read Harry Potter out loud. First, my oldest, my daughter, she reads a whole page, then she hands it to my son, and he reads a paragraph. Then the baby, with help from the two of them reads a sentence.... and it gets passed back and forth, and I just close my eyes, sitting in my recliner... listening to my kids... read... out loud.

Speedy puts his hands to his eyes and is as surprised as I am where this story has taken him. I reach over, beyond his plate of half eaten steak, and grab his arm, “You’ve got a good life.” The tears arrive now in their fullness, unencumbered and welcome, and

even.

“Yeah.... I do.”

This is a mustard seed story. This story reflects the Kin-dom of God. This shows us how a small seed of possibility can grown into a huge plant with “large branches that the birds in the sky are able to nest in for shade.” Or wide arms that can hold three children close and lovingly encourage them to be all that they can be.

Other parables talk about the soil in which the seeds are sown. Speedy may have had some rough soil to start.... the soil of “alcoholism, fighting, estrangement, and inappropriateness, on top of dysfunction stacked high onto sadness. And yet, he built his own family.”

He was blessed with the rich soil of support and love and understanding that allowed resiliency to crack open the seed of possibility and grow within him. Yolanda who didn't really know him, but knew of him....

“ If anything happened to you, it would break my heart in two.” She barely knows him. “You know I've seen you playing with your nephew in the park. What a good tio you are. I've also seen you feed the homeless at the church. What a generous and good thing that is.”

She offered him hope and a really possibility that his life could be different.

We can also ask, what are seeds of possibility here, within each of us? What might be growing under the ground for us as a church?

The parables of Jesus give us an opportunity to look deeper, to rethink the ordinary, the expected outcome and imagine a future of possibility.