

Sermon, Proper 22 “Mustard Seed”, October 6, 2019, Jane A. Beebe

In praying the passage from Luke this week, I was, at first, drawn by the image of the mustard seed. Jesus uses seeds many times to illustrate truths about living a spiritual life. Jesus has just been teaching the disciples about forgiveness. What he tells them must have been daunting to them—as it is for us: “If the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive.” (Luke 17:4) Seven times is hard enough. In Matthew, Jesus says it is to be seventy times seven! No wonder the apostles beg Jesus, “Increase our faith!” (Luke 17:5)

Jesus responds by telling the disciples something startling: “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.” I think this is good news. We need faith only the size of a tiny seed. And if those tiny seeds are gathered together, just think what could be accomplished in God’s kingdom—or at the very least really good mustard. Seeds are extraordinary. Julian of Norwich is said to have held an acorn in her hand, saying, “This is all that is.” What treasure the squirrels and chipmunks are gathering! Sr. Joan Chittister, OSB said, “In every seed is the reckless, electric, confounding power of creation made new again.”¹

¹ Shiva and writer of introduction., *Sacred Seed / Bartholomew; I.; Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople*,; 1940-, 13.

On Friday I was taking another walk in the Quabbin. It was an incredibly blustery day. I began to think of all the different kinds of seeds and nuts in the woods, and how they were being blown around. I could begin to imagine that seeds planted in the sea were a possibility. Miraculous as that would be, Jesus reorients the disciples back to day-to-day life. The seeds of faith are meant to sprout and grow into service, into the love of neighbor. I read a perceptive reflection on this passage by Dennis Sanders. He observes, “Being faithful is doing what God would have us do in the world even when we think our faith is incomplete and doesn’t measure up.” He goes on to say this: “...Jesus brings up something that is falling out of favor in society: a sense of duty. Duty can sound like a musty old book that hasn’t been touched in years. But Jesus is going to be faithful to God even though it means facing an untimely end. He is talking about doing what you are called to do, even when it might cost you.”

When I think of duty, of living a dutiful life, I think of my father. At 85 he suffered a stroke; he died at age 92. The last few years of his life he coped with the effects of Parkinson’s disease. While physical, emotional and cognitive changes—and the losses associated with those changes—are inevitable and beyond our control, I believe there are other factors besides physical and emotional health that contribute to a good life. While I would never argue that the presence of suffering and trauma are necessary for a good Christian life, it does not preclude experiencing much of what

makes life good and meaningful. What is key is how one responds to suffering and loss. I would posit that the process of grieving occurs throughout life; it too is inevitable. Yet it is not impossible to derive meaning or even joy in the midst of loss and grief.

If physical and/or mental health is diminished in later years, what contributes to life's meaning and a sense of well-being? I believe it can be derived from a strong sense of purpose. In my father's case I think his sense of purpose was bolstered by adhering to duty. A sense of purpose has a positive effect on physical and mental health. This positive effect may also be seen as resilience. Is one able to continue to navigate the ups and downs of daily life with a sense of acceptance and creativity? What a gift Jesus was giving the disciples by showing the profound simplicity of faithfulness.

The word 'duty' continued to resonate in my brain until I recalled what association I was making. It was the words of the Girl Scout promise. It has changed slightly since I learned it. This is the one that I pledged:

Girl Scout Promise
1927

On my honor, I will try:
To do my duty to God and my country,
To help other people at all times,
To obey the Girl Scout Laws.

As Episcopalians we make promises, too, in our Baptismal Covenant. In the Baptismal Covenant (after an interactive assent to the Apostles' Creed), those affirming their faith are asked a series of questions. The first is "Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?" (BCP, p. 304) This question asks: "Will you continue..." It does not specify in what manner one is to do this. There is nothing that says one must do any of it perfectly. Our efforts can be mustard-seed-sized! The context for fellowship, bread-breaking and prayer may change, but with creativity and a willingness to continue to engage, much is possible. A pastoral visitor from my father's church often brought him communion, first in his apartment, later in the skilled nursing center. I later learned that she was in the early stages of multiple sclerosis and had recently lost a spouse and a brother. It was apparent that she derived much meaning in bringing the sacraments and a prayerful presence to others. Ironically the early retirement necessitated by the MS made this ministry possible for her.

Another of the questions is: "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?" (BCP, p. 305) The ability to be relational, to recognize others as neighbors and love them, can continue to the end of one's life, no matter how it has been impaired. After moving to a retirement community my father visited friends in the hospital as long as he was able to drive. He drove neighbors to appointments. While living in his apartment he regularly volunteered to deliver the community newsletter. He shared his newspaper with his next-door neighbor on the

hall. He encouraged people he met in the hall to stand as straight as they could so as to maintain balance and strength. Even after becoming more tired and frail, ultimately confined to a wheelchair, he greeted neighbors on his hallway with a touch on the shoulder even if they could not easily speak. I came to understand my father's essential identity was that of the good neighbor.

How wonderful it was to me that he carried this identity with him throughout his life (although I did not recognize it as a younger person). It was life-giving because it allowed him to engage with the staff and other residents. And he did it with humor as much as he was able. Acknowledging that there was no roadmap for his life ahead, he used to chuckle and say, "I've never been this age before!" Yet he managed to be faithful right up to the end.

Am I a Good Neighbor?

Am I a good neighbor?
I am dutiful in a time
when duty is not prized, even
seen as keeping me from success, from
having all that I am supposed to have
as a man in this world: money,
title, respect.

I show up to unlock, to lock the doors,
to close the windows
of the church.
I know where the punch bowl is kept.

I notarize the agreement so that you may buy
the car; I meet you

on Saturday so that you have enough money to leave
for vacation. I give
of my time. I deliver the news, the
newsletter, the check; I make
the deposit on time...

Am I a good neighbor?

I drive to the hospital, to the pharmacy, the important
appointment with you. It is not always life and death.
But sometimes
it is. And I am there...