

“Planting the Seeds of Disruption”
Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
Sunday, June 14, 2015

A number of weeks ago, on a Friday when I was home doing sermon work, I got a call from our office manager, Sherri Vestal, who called to tell me that, when she arrived at the church, there was a woman sleeping in the hallway, right in front of my office door. To get into my office, Sherri informed me, I would have to jump over this woman, but when I arrived at the church an hour or so later, I encountered this woman, and I instantly recognized her as the woman we had put up in a hotel three weeks earlier. She had come back again looking for more help — help which, this time, we were not able to give her.

Upon learning that we wouldn't be helping her this time, she informed me, with rage in her eyes, that I was a sham and that her preacher, Creflo Dollar, was the “real deal”. Now, Creflo Dollar, if you did not know, was the TV prosperity gospel preacher, who recently asked his viewers for \$65 million in order that he could buy a new private jet. Now, our homeless lady, with only a bag and the clothes on her back, had clearly never experienced the economic prosperity that Creflo Dollar promised her, but she showed me a book of his that she carried with her and informed me that he knew the Lord, that she was saved, and that I was “SOL”.

The fact of the matter is that, in our day and time, religious hucksters are a dime a dozen, and some are very successful, and I have to confess that I am sort of tempted to go down that road because the money they make is phenomenal, but whatever you would like Christianity to represent, in our day and time, it can be anything. This fluidity of the Christian experience was most recently taken up in an article by Will Wilkinson in The Economist magazine where, in response to the recent transformation of Bruce Jenner into Caitlyn Jenner, he says that the greatest challenge of the newly revealed Caitlyn Jenner is not her gender transformation, but her claim of being a lifelong Christian. Wilkinson wrote this: “The tolerant Jesus of Ms. Jenner may not be the Jesus of Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther or John Wesley. He is a Jesus perhaps more thoroughly invested in the autonomous eroticized individualism of Ralph Waldo Emerson”. He is certainly not the Jesus of the first century reconstruction of Jewish law, but that is the America and still Americanizing Jesus who, like many millions of believers like Caitlyn Jenner, attend the church today. Caitlyn Jenner is a leading indicator, not of the secularization of America but of the ongoing Americanization of Christianity. “She is a Christian”, writes Will Wilkinson, “a distinctly American kind of Christian”.

Now, perhaps one of the most well-known and popular images of Christian discipleship comes in Jesus' parables about seeds and those who sow them. There is, in the Gospel of Mark, for example, the Parable of the Sower that we just heard, and this is the parable of the importance of where the seed is sown. There is, following that, the Parable of the Growing Seed which ends with an abundant harvest. It is about promise of harvesting the seed, and then there is the Parable of the Mustard Seed which, while a tiny seed, grows into a large bush and is home to birds.

These parables about seeds, of course, are metaphors about God's kingdom and how it takes hold in the world, and they are, on their surface at least, cause for patience because these seeds don't grow quickly. These parables are cause for carefulness as to where the seeds are planted because they must be planted in the proper soil, and these parables are, of course, a cause for action. For the people of faith, there is work to do. There are stories to tell, healing and forgiveness to be shared, and acts of mercy to be engaged in.

There has always, in our culture, been an assumption about the seeds. These seeds were about God's word or God's kingdom or the call to discipleship, but as Christianity continues to be Americanized—that is, made into anything that we deem it to be—perhaps it is worth taking a closer look at a mustard seed. The Parable of the Mustard Seed is made up of only three verses. It is one of the shortest

parables in all of scripture. It is about the kingdom of God. It is about the small becoming large. It is about where the birds of the air can make their nests. This, of course, in a parable is all metaphor but, in reality, this parable at its core is about how the followers of Jesus are to be something different... how the followers of Jesus are to be like mustard seeds.

Now, what do we know about mustard seeds besides their being small? Listen to what Pliny the Elder said, who was a Roman author and naturalist of the first century. Pliny the Elder was running around when Jesus was around. Pliny the Elder had this to say about mustard. He wrote: "Mustard, with its pungent taste and fiery effect, is extremely beneficial for health. It grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted, but, on the other hand, when it has once been sown, it is impossible to get the place free of it as, when the seed falls to the ground, it germinates at once". The mustard seed is dangerous because it will overwhelm everything in its path, and it destroys the well-ordered garden, and those nesting birds of the parable, which may strike us as charming, were something very different to the first century farmers. Birds to the first century farmer, perhaps like today, were a permanent threat to their seed and their grain, so the point of the parable is not just that the mustard seed starts as a small seed and grows into a large bush. The point is that it tends to take over where it is not wanted. The mustard seed tends to grow and get out of control, and it tends to attract birds that destroy the well-ordered gardens of the world.

So, what Jesus was saying in His parable is that the kingdom of God is not just like a mustard seed as if it was a random seed, but the kingdom of God is like a pungent shrub with dangerous takeover properties, and for those in the first century who owned fields, crops and harvests, it was a parable heard differently from those for whom fields, crops and harvests were always the property of others. In the Parable of the Mustard Seed, Jesus was saying to those early disciples "You need to be planting seeds of God's kingdom. These seeds are very dangerous and threatening to the established order. When you plant these seeds, if they take root and if they grow truly the way that I intend them to grow, you will be disturbing many people". Jesus was talking about building a new order amidst the old, dying order, so His parables were always subversive, always pointing to a new reality, always pointing to a new way of living to which most people were not committed.

Peace Church, with the installation and blessings of our Dawnings Initiative Team today, is beginning a process of visioning and re-visioning our ministry. It is beginning a process of understanding anew the gospel of Jesus Christ and of understanding anew our call from God. We are in a new day to which God is calling us, to a new vision which is going to be revealed, we trust, and we do so in a time when the established church has lost nearly all of its cultural influence, when Christianity has evolved to mean anything at all and nothing at the same time. It is a time when slick religious hucksters have flooded into the void where the mainline church once stood, but as the administrators of my high school used to tell its student body again and again, they would choose the refrain "integrity matters". The church needs to be an institution of mustard seeds that are filled with integrity. Integrity is the practice of adhering to moral and ethical principles in opposition to hypocrisy. The church's moral and ethical principles come from the teachings of Jesus Christ—teaching allowed, in recent years, to be watered down into bland, quaint, sentimental notions of love and perhaps some charity.

As the Parable of the Mustard Seed reminds us today, the kingdom of God to which we are called is a pungent and fiery notion. The kingdom of God is something that grows uncontrollably and it takes over where it is not always wanted. Through the hard work of historians and scholars in a variety of fields, we now know more about the life and ministry of Jesus than ever before—a life and ministry for which people are hungry, a life and ministry to which we are called.

So, today we are challenged by this Parable of the Mustard Seed which is a parable about God's kingdom which is fiery, pungent and takes over where it is not wanted. May God be with us today as we bless our Dawnings Initiative Team and as we step forward into the future of envisioning our ministry, in God's name. Amen.