

God's Got This

I Samuel 15:34-16:13, Mk 4:26-34

Proper 6B St Thomas's Church 2018 The Rev Julie Kelsey

God plants the seeds of grace and love early.

My goddaughter loves – of all things – plaster.

As a very small child, she would wrap herself

around the black plaster cat that sat on the hearth at her house for hours,

reading the cat stories, drawing pictures for the cat,

whispering all her secrets to the cat.

She earned her PhD at Oxford studying – you guessed it – plaster...

the plaster casts that precede metal sculpting.

And just last week, she landed a job as the archivist

with an artist whose specialty is plaster casting.

Our grandson started his musical career at the age of 18 mos,

putting on his gold cardboard crown and ermine cape

and pretend mic in hand, bellowed out Do the Hokey-Pokey

perfectly on key.

As of today he has taught himself to play 13 instruments

and this summer will be going to Ireland to compete

in the Irish national fiddle contest.

As for me, the love seed planted in me derived from
an actual mustard seed,
a tiny thing encased in an amulet and made into a charm
on a thin silver necklace chain.

It was given to me by my godmother when I turned four,
my tall, slender, redheaded, and beautiful Aunt Alice.

At age four, she reminded me of God.

And when she put the mustard seed necklace on me,
I thought God had personally touched and blessed me.
I refused to take it off for weeks to my mother's dismay.
And here I am today.

God plants the seeds of love early.

But once planted, how, when and if that seed bears fruit
is another matter altogether.

Does it grow strong and healthy?

Does it produce enough branches to shelter and include others?

Does the seed's light get hidden under a bushel basket
rarely seen...and if shared, only with a very few?

Or does that seed wither away for lack of proper nourishment?

Indeed while it is true that God plants the seed of love
and gives the growth even as we sleep,
proper growth and flourishing needs human initiative and care as well.

Think back to the parable of the sower and his seed.

That seed of God's love and is generously scattered everywhere,
no matter what the soil conditions: on rocks, on thistles,
in soil too shallow for the seed to root.

When God scatters loving grace it seems God isn't fussy
about where it is to land. God is for sure an equal opportunity giver!
But if those seeds of grace are to grow and bear fruit,
the soil on which it falls has to be properly tended.

When it comes to the seeds of the KOG, it's another story.

Mustard seeds are different. They have a mind of their own.

Though they are the smallest of seeds and easily fit
in a case smaller than a dime which a four year old can wear
around her neck, they take over wherever they fall.

They're like the weeds that even bust through concrete sidewalks

or the bamboo that broke through its container wall
to take over our garden.

And like bamboo, mustard plants aren't small and inconspicuous.
Mustard seeds growing along the Sea of Galilee, for example,
can grow as tall as a house.

Mustard is a virtually indestructible plant that germinates rapidly
and can quickly take over a whole garden.

This is what it looks like when God's kingdom
invades our lives: it is hardy and intrusive
and like God's gracious love, may not even be noticed by us sleepers.
Until one day when signs of it are undeniable
and we can only gasp and say
God was in this place and I didn't know it.

It took me years of self-questioning and self-doubt to realize
that in these parables of the kingdom, Jesus is patiently
trying to tell his followers – over and over –
about God: what God can and will do.

I was worried about whether I had this much (tiny)

or this much (huge) faith in general.

I worried about whether or not I had enough faith

-to heal that illness

-to land that job

-to move that mountain

or did I have to exercise more,

work even harder,

pray harder,

for God to even pay attention to me.

I never thought about what GOD might be doing

right here, right now under my nose.

I never thought Jesus in his parables

was talking about GOD and how visibly and yet mysteriously

God is at work scattering seeds of love

and bringing God's kingdom towards its fullness.

But I have finally learned the parables are not about us

and whether we need to pray harder

or work more or exercise harder...

but about our God who gives life and the growth
without our having to work for it, or earn it,
whether we want it or not, whether it disrupts us or not...
all of it pure gift
that comes to all people as naturally as seed growing.

In our personal lives, despite God's early planting of gracious love
our soil may not be the entirely good ground
necessary for faithful flourishing and fruitfulness.

We all have rocky places,
places of shallow soil, and days when our thistles are very prickly.

We need the mercy of God
and good gardeners around us
to turn the hard ground of
our prejudice, self-righteousness, and greed
into the good soil that nurtures seeds
of love, compassion and justice-making.

In our shared national life, as we have become increasingly aware,
we NEED that tough mustard seed of God's kingdom to take over.

The plants we are now growing
do not have branches that are hospitable
to all the birds looking for rest.

Too many can't find a branch on the tree
and any place of song and abundance.

People in Puerto Rico are still without power a year later.

Mass incarceration continues.

Immigrants are persona non grata,

and UNSPEAKABLY, children of migrants separated from their mothers...

Sadly we could go on and on...

I could hasten to reassure you with empty bromides
that the KOG is coming – while that is true, I am painfully aware
that that reassurance is easy for white people...

White people who have had the good land
and have enslaved people of color to tend it
for as long as our country has existed.

White people who have coopted the music of people of color

from gospel to blues to rap to hip hop to salsa,
never listening to the cries of the hearts and minds and souls
that created it...in fact often thinking it was their own.

White people who continue to watch major league athletes
as regular entertainment while depriving young people of color
of decent housing and a proper education
and then accuse them of being lazy when they can't find a job.

At the Divinity School where I work,
Black students assure me they have had "the talk"
with their parents, not the sex talk
but the "how to behave when you are stopped by the cops" talk.
I am aware that I don't have to wonder if my children
will come home alive at night, every day of their lives.
This is not my worry.

Tyrone and Will, two tall, handsome, Black present community leaders,
tell me they have to put on suits and ties
when walking on the sidewalks of New Haven
in hopes the cops won't stop them.

They always notice other pedestrians crossing the street to avoid them.

No one even notices me – or my children – when I walk.

Perhaps you have seen the photos of the memorials

at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice

and the Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama?

At the Legacy Museum

endless hanging columns each representing a county

and engraved with the names of those lynched there.

At the National Memorial,

a sculpture grouping of nameless men and women

naked and in chains crying out in anguish

tear at the heart of the onlooker.

If there were statues of my ancestors,

they would standing proudly looking like royalty

with placards celebrating their accomplishments.

These memorials in Montgomery are

a horrifying confrontation with our untaught history.

Unlike for people of color, white people –

even those who struggle - have it pretty good by comparison.

It's easy for us (white people) to think that for us the kingdom is already well on its way.

But we fool ourselves if we think our financial and social well-being mean we are on our way to heaven.

God's ways are not our ways

Financial and social success are not of importance to God

Love and justice are God's currency

and those who are left out and left behind are the ones God particularly loves.

The good news in this era of corruption and an absence of any moral standards, is that the veil of the temple has been torn in two.

Evil has been revealed and even here, God will use evil for good.

That hardy and intrusive plant which is God's kingdom coming will continue to grow and intrude.

Just as we were sleeping and rising, hardly paying any attention,

God in Jesus became one of us, himself the KOG come among us.
In our lives, the Holy Spirit moved over the troubled waters of the nation
and there was art and theatre and movies and books
shocking us into the story of racial violence and discrimination
insisting that we listen and hear, take off our blinders and see.

And finally some white people in power are paying attention:
Starbucks and Disney holding training sessions
MSNBC holding a televised Town Hall.
Roseanne was cancelled.
God will not be mocked!

God insists that we remember that
Christ died for ALL people
and continues to urge his followers on now,
that all of us who live in Him
might no longer live for ourselves and our own personal gain
but for him who died and was raised for all people.

God insists that we remember that

the first followers of Jesus,
were a bunch of multi-colored nobodies,
as insignificant as mustard seeds,
the rejected and the ones on the short end of the social stick...
and that the invasion of God's love and justice continues
even when the storm surge is rising and
Jesus seems to be asleep in the back of the boat.

The ones on the top of the social heap
with their doubts and fears and busy lives
were the ones who did their best to pull out that strong plant
by its roots,
the ones who strung Jesus up on the cross
and continue their lynching to this day.

The seed of love and justice God planted in them has withered and died.
But God's kingdom is coming whether we see it or not,

We have each had a seed in us planted early by God,
a seed that is uniquely ours, given us as a gift in love
one that only we can use ... for the furthering of God's kingdom.

Our response, like Samuel's, is to answer when God calls our name.

Whether we work in plaster

or make music

or create gardens of plants or flowers or friends

as followers of Christ, perhaps we would do well to continually rethink

our busy lives and our striving.

For who and for what are you striving?

What seeds have been planted in you?

What seeds have you planted?

Do you offer your branches to those who have no place to rest

that they, too, may share in the song and abundance

of God's good creation?

Our seed(s) may be small but the KOG is coming

and resting in hope and trust when we aren't even looking

God will turn our small seeds into the largest of shrubs

and we will look in amazement and say

God was in this place and we didn't know it.

Amen.

