

Power of the Small

A prompting offered by Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Mark 4:26-34

He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

**[Jesus] said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground...
It is like a mustard seed, the smallest of all the seeds on the earth."**

Mark 4:26, 31

Camino Real is perhaps Tennessee Williams most bizarre and least familiar play. "Camino Real" is literally and metaphorically the "end of the road." It's the end of the actual road, and also, it's where people go to die, although many of them fight this knowledge. And surrounding the small outpost of Camino Real is the forbidding desert. There is no escape.

And gathered at this end of the road is a motley crew of characters –some you would recognize – others are brand-new. For example: Don Quixote arrives, dazed, raggedy, still journeying. Casanova is held up there. He is known as Jacques and he has now pretty much gone to seed, the sad lover growing old. Lord Byron is there, flamboyant, bombastic, filled with yearning. All of these kind of iconic characters are there, hanging out at this dusty frontier town, waiting to either die or escape.

Into this hopeless mix comes an American, named Kilroy. He doesn't "get" what "Camino Real" is. He doesn't accept the "rules" of the place – that it is "the end." And miraculously, by the end of the play, some hope and new life starts to emerge. The fountain in the square starts gushing water again, a symbol of plenty, nourishment, and life. People start to wake out of their haze and start to be able to connect again. And that seems to be what it is all about for Tennessee Williams – loneliness – and the possibility, the heart-breaking possibility, of human connection; the possibility of hope and beauty even amidst life's most difficult realities. (This summary of *Camino Real* is largely from www.sheilaomalley.com)

In the play, Marguerite says to Jacques:

What is it, this feeling between us? When you feel my exhausted weight against your shoulder -- when I clasp your anxious old hawk's head to my breast, what is it we feel in whatever is left of our hearts? Something, yes, something – delicate, unreal, bloodless! The sort of violets that could grow on the moon, or in the crevices of those far away mountains, fertilized by the droppings of carrion birds. Those birds are familiar to us. Their shadows inhabit the plaza. I've heard them flapping their wings like old charwomen beating worn-out carpets with grey brooms ...But tenderness, the violets in the mountains – can't break the rocks!

Jacques, the replies: "The violets in the mountains can break the rocks if you believe in them and allow them to grow!"

And out of all of Tennessee Williams voluminous and far more famous literary works, it seems that Jacques response to Marguerite meant so much to him that he used it to summarize the meaning and hope of his life and work. And today, if you go to Calvary Cemetery and Mausoleum in St. Louis, Missouri you will find these words etched on Tennessee Williams gravestone: "The Violets in the mountains have broken the rocks."

The actress Patricia Clarkston recently used this line at the Human Rights Campaign's New Orleans Gala and she interpreted the line this way: "To me its meaning is simple. The hard, the cold, the oppressive will at long last be broken apart by a force that is beautiful, natural, colorful and alive!" To which I say, "Amen sister Patricia, amen!"

What a time we live in. We may often feel like we are caught in our own Camino Real-like drama. So much uncertainty and despair, so much negativity, so much stupidity! Here in Ohio and in the Miami Valley we especially feel the cold dead-ends: GM plants closed; NCR Corporation is packing up and heading south; some of the highest foreclosure rates in the country. We feel the hard weight of too much polarization, too much vitriol and invective in our religion, our politics, our media; too little dialogue; too little human connection and understanding. We feel the oppressiveness and hurt of too much lunacy: learned adults arguing over whether torture is really torture, whether healthcare will remain a luxury for some or a human decency for all, whether a warming planet should be a call to action NOW or not. And on top of all of that an abortion doctor is killed in his church, a gunman full of hate for blacks and Jews murders at the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC. Life can be so disturbing and unsettling.

And just this past week I went to Columbus and sat in on the opponent testimony for House Bill 176, the Equal Housing and Employment Act (EHEA), which would be the first pro-equality legislation ever passed by the Ohio legislature. This bill is now before the House of Representatives State Government Committee. I know it sounds like a sadistic act on my part to actually go and listen to the opponents of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender equality speak their craziness, but I did. And it wasn't pretty either. It was painful to listen to it. Everyone who spoke against the bill was a Christian...a right wing, fundamentalist-type Christian mind you, but a Christian none-the-less. It was profoundly troublesome to my spirit to hear so much fear, and ignorance, and narrow-mindedness, and misunderstanding and downright meanness offered in the name of our Jesus.

And to all of these issues I have named are the Camino Real-like struggles you face with your job, with your finances, with your relationships, for your well-being and wholeness.

How powerless we are to affect these matters. How unimportant, how insignificant, how overwhelmed we can feel. It's a feeling we bring to church too. I do. And no doubt you do too.

But here at church we hear a counter word. Strange as it may sound, we hear about a God who seems to relish choosing the foolish in the world to confuse the wise, and the weak in the world to confound the strong, and the low and despised in the world to surprise the high and mighty. We hear the Jesus stories about the transforming power of small things – like a few grains in good soil or a little leaven hidden in the dough or the tiniest of seed, the mustard seed planted in the ground. We hear that "The Violets in the mountains have broken the rocks."

Jesus chose to work with small things, like five loaves and two fish, like a widow's mite, like a cup of cold water. Jesus chose a small cadre of unlikely associates, all un-ordained and un-credentialed like himself. He preferred and took great delight to serve with the "little" people, the so called powerless of the day – the women and children, the meek and the poor, the dirty, despised and rejected. Mostly marginal folks they were, pushed to the sides. Jesus, as Walter Wink reminds us, risked his entire ministry on the power of the small. He risked everything on the sufficiency of the infinitesimal. He risked his total investment on the strength of a few to affect change.

One of the things I love about worship is that we come together to hear stories about the strength not in number...about the big not always better...about the large not necessarily beautiful. Many of these stories are ripped right from the pages of our sacred scriptures. And many of these stories are told amongst ourselves as we try to practice our faith and be responsive in our relationship with the Still Speaking God.

Stories such as the one about Gideon from the book of Judges (Chapters 6-7). Gideon kept learning and discovering the power that is possible with just a feisty few. And part of the reason we named our son Gideon was our hope that he would be able to see himself as powerful and significant in God's eyes...and no matter what life throws at him, no matter what battles he will be called to fight...that he would see himself as having the feisty potential to effect positive change and great goodness.

I love to tell the story of a man from Yellow Springs who stopped by our church last year to secure a couple tickets to the Carrie Newcomer concert. As many of you know, our church has been in the Dayton

Daily News a lot in our short history. The paper has written about the big named authors and theologians who have spoken here, like John Shelby Spong, John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg. They have written about the nationally known musicians who have performed here, like Kate Campbell, Carrie newcomer, and Jason and DeMarco. They have written about our witness for progressive Christianity and our witness for justice on a number of issues. And I often get calls from Dayton Daily News reporters seeking a word of comment about some breaking news story. It seems I have become the voice for "liberal" Christianity in the Miami Valley. And when I speak, the name of our church always appears with my name: Rev. Mike Castle, pastor of Cross Creek Community Church. Anyway, back to my story, I was the only one here when the man stopped by to buy his tickets. As we were completing the transaction, the man said: "This church is so small. I have read about you for a long time now, and I just imagined this church to be much larger than it really is." I love this story and I know it's true: our church has somehow been given a larger voice and a larger influence than our size might indicate.

And here lately I have come again to see the power of a small group of folks working for change with our elected officials on issues that matter. In April, as the Equal Housing and Employment Act was being readied for presentation to the Ohio House of Representatives, I invited our newly elected Ohio House representative from Washington Township and Centerville, Rep. Terry Blair, to stop by and discuss the EHEA with me. I also invited Amy Russell, the minister from the Miami Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, and Kim Peters, a PFLAG mom to join me. Rep. Blair is a Republican and has never had to vote on a gay issue before and no one had a clue as to how he might vote. Anyway, Rep. Blair agreed to come by to discuss EHEA. At that meeting, to our stunned amazement, he agreed to support the EHEA without hesitation, and he did it with confidence. At first, my colleagues thought he was blowing smoke up my "you know what" but I, perhaps naively, certainly optimistically, took him at his word. And Rep. Blair not only said he would support it, he went on to become one of only two Republican sponsors of the bill, along with 25 Democrats. Friends, this is big deal! Our last representative wouldn't even meet with us!

Of course I wrote him a thank you note for his support. In return, he wrote me back a handwritten note saying: "I hope that HB176 will receive the support it needs to pass. It means much for our society – no one should support discrimination of any sort. Our world will be better off if we show tolerance of others beliefs – in fact the country was formed on just such a principle. Be well. Terry."

After four years of lobbying, which I have to tell you often felt like a long, dry, hopeless wilderness – I have finally seen some sprouts from seeds planted and nurtured. And this past Friday, I, along with Brian Newcomb, the pastor at David's United Church of Christ in Kettering, and Beth Holten, the pastor of St. Paul's United Methodist Church, and Amy Russell from the Miami Valley UU Fellowship and our own Jan Harry, retired co-pastor of Normandy United Methodist Church, a covenant member here at Cross Creek and mother of a lesbian daughter we know as "Sonya," sat down with Republican Rep. Peggy Lehner, who represents the Kettering, West Carrollton and Oakwood area in the Ohio House, to discuss EHEA. In Columbus, she is known as a "social conservative," whatever that means, and no one knew how she was going to vote. But at the end of our meeting she said, "I will support the bill." And I tell you, if we would have had some champagne in David's Church's conference room, we would have popped the cork right then and there. What a joyous moment for a group of ministers to sense the power of the small.

And if you are wondering, we do have our sights set on Rep. Seth Morgan, whose district includes the Huber Heights and Vandalia areas. They say he is a long, LONG shot, but, hey, we are on a roll! And if we can get his support we will have all three representatives who make up Jon Husted's Ohio Senate District on board for EHEA. Then of course, we'll have to start working on Senator Husted. He is one of the four Republican Ohio Senator's needed to finally get the EHEA passed and on to the governor's desk for his signature.

Stories. All kinds of stories we tell. Bible stories. Personal stories. Stories about the power of the small. Stories about the fruitfulness and possibility of little acts. We need such stories about the transforming power of one person or a few people. We thrive on such stories where small is both beautiful and potent. We depend on such stories of hope and possibility, where "The Violets in the mountains have broken the rocks."

But let me be clear. In telling these stories, I'm not here to elevate the power of my efforts, or your efforts, or ours. I'm not here to tell hopeful stories about the amazing influence of one or a few. That's important and necessary, but any motivational speaker at some sales convention would give you that. Rather,

these stories we tell, whether of Gideon, or of Jesus, or of our own faithful acts are really stories about God – about God’s power through the small; about God’s strength through weakness, about God’s surprises and grace in the unexpected. More specifically, these stories are about the kingdom of God that is here, that is now.

And today, I stand before us to remind us, as the old hymn puts it, that when “We in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing.” This powerful energy of transformation and change is not self generating. It is a sacred, divine power coming *through* us, but not *from* us.

Here’s where I part company with the secular activist. As one committed to justice, I keep being driven back to God or else I end up empty and cynical. As one committed to shalom (peace), I am forced back to God – or I slide into the pond despair. And according to our Gospel story today, it is God who does the transforming work – often through the so called small and seemingly insignificant – and we are invited to participate in this movement of change and this awesome work of transformation.

So, listen up everybody! The little stories about seeds are about God, the presence of God which is like a seed which invisibly, mysteriously, quietly grows until the stalk appears; then the head; then the full grain. Or this activity of God is like the tiniest of seeds, the mustard seed, which invisibly, mysteriously, quietly grows into a large scrub, useful for shade and enjoyed by the birds. God, Jesus is saying, is that kind of transforming energy – mysterious and invisible – like the energy that transforms small seeds into heads of grain and tiny mustard seeds into shrubs. God is such a transforming power, an invisible movement from despair to hope, from exploitation to justice, from fear to trust. Yes, God is found converting boredom into vitality, bondage into freedom, death into life, futility into meaning, and isolation into community. And yes, it is a mystery! Such transformations defy explanations, leaving us stunned in awe and humility.

But what a relief this message is to people who care deeply about our world. What hope this brings to us who seek justice in our own Camino Real-like world. We cannot program trust and freedom and vitality. We cannot force compassion to grow. “Relax,” I hear in these words. This spirit of transformation is at work in every relationship, in every community. Learn to find it, learn to name it; learn to flow with it; learn to channel it. Be the soil that nurtures such transformation! Yield to this force! Provide the space for such conversions to occur! But Relax! You are not the source. “Relax,” this message says. Relax in the trust that God’s way of love and justice will come to fruition “on earth as in heaven.”

Certainly this is a tough hope for me – for you -- to affirm, that someday this action of God in history will be victorious, that someday the fullness of grain will appear above ground, that someday the shrub for shade and birds will be complete. Clearly, the first Christians were already celebrating God’s triumph. These first Christians, even in the face of persecution and violent resistance were singing victory songs. As they saw it—this new reality, this new order, this reign of God was already here. It was now. It was happening. And they were to live as if the kingdom of God was already so! They were to live as those who had already read the last chapter. This is why the Civil Rights movement was so full of song. There was genuine joy with each protestor who could sing “deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall overcome some day.” Not their day, but “someday.” This is why the South African minister, Allan Boesak, never tired of saying to his followers that South Africa’s apartheid system had fallen, even before it fell. “The battle is won, even though the struggle is not yet over...and besides, it drives the dragon crazy when you sing about his downfall even though you are bleeding.” In other words, victory may not come in your day but victory will come some day. Dare we relax and rest and work and sing in the hope of God’s will to abundant life being done “on earth as it is in heaven?”

“Relax,” I also hear in these short parables. Don’t try to evaluate the transformative work of God. Don’t be always taking your own spiritual temperature and measuring your success. This mystery we are considering is mostly invisible, unpredictable, always full of surprises. Just rest assured that where there are expressions of compassion, God is at work – that where there it turning from fear to trust, from injustice and abuse to fairness, from the ways of death to the ways of life, God is alive there. And not a lot of faith is required – just a little faith that God is able to act in our world; just a little trust that this Mystery, this God, is present as transforming power, willing to work miracles through the power of the small.

We have only just begun to move into this long, green season of Pentecost, and already in this Ordinary Time, we are being called to imagine the harvest that will come from our trust, however small and tiny. Already we are being called to imagine the spreading branches that will come from our small acts of love and justice. Already we are being called to imagine how “The Violets in the mountains have broken the rocks.” Amen.