

June 14, 2009

Second Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 4:26-34

All Saints' Episcopal Church

Rev'd Elizabeth Shows Caffey

Oh how I wish that I were a music connoisseur to come up with some great jazz analogy or story to connect with today's gospel. I spent some fun nights in a jazz bar when I was living in NYC, but I don't think those evenings are very good fodder for sermons. What I have noticed about jazz music from my very limited experience is that a piece begins with a fairly simple sequence of notes which form the base of the piece and as the musicians continue to play and various instruments begin to improvise they build on the basic notes, and the music grows and expands, it begins to fill up the room. It reaches into your soul and lifts you up and carries you away. And as the various instruments take their turn improvising, you begin to feel like you have entered into the heavenly realm. But the entire experience is built around that one base sequence of notes played together, the seed if you will, of the entire piece.

God has already planted a seed to grow the kingdom in the incarnation of his son Jesus Christ. Today, Jesus reminds us in these parables that God continues to grow the kingdom, planting and nurturing more and more seeds that grow into bushes with intricate branches growing all around us. Those seeds of faith that God has planted have grown and spread throughout the world. In some places those seeds are now large looming bushes with branches that inextricably connect us one to another.

During my senior year of college I knew what I wanted to do the year following graduation. I wanted to spend a year serving as a volunteer and living in an intentional Christian community. I knew about the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, which has many programs all over the country, but I really wanted something with an Episcopal flair, so I began my search for Episcopal service programs. At the time only three existed: Micah Project in Boston, the Vocational Discernment Year in Dallas, and the Episcopal Urban Intern Program in Los Angeles. Each program had its own unique focus and opportunity, but in the end I went to LA. During that year I learned a lot about myself: about my faith, my strengths, and my weaknesses. It was an important and defining year for me. I recognized that it was such a gift to be able to do my year of service in an Episcopal program. As my time in LA was coming to an end I heard through the Episcopal grapevine that the Chapel of the Cross in Chapel Hill, NC had entered into serious discussion and discernment about starting a similar intern program for recent college graduates. I was thrilled that another intern opportunity was opening-up for Episcopal young adults. That fall they hired me to develop and later direct the Johnson Intern Program at the Chapel of the Cross. This program focused on three main areas: spiritual formation, community service, and Christian community living. The first year

of the program there were three interns and the second year there were five. While developing this intern program, I was also in conversation with the National Church Center about developing a network of the Episcopal Service Programs to work together, be supportive of one another and pool our experience and resources.

When I left my position as director of the Intern Program to go to seminary, we had accepted five more interns into the program for the third year and there were plans for the interns in all of the six national programs to go on retreat together to strengthen the bond between the various programs. During seminary I would from time to time run into other seminary students who were alumni of other Episcopal Service Programs, but for the most part I didn't pay attention to what was happening with the Johnson Intern Program and I had not heard anything further about our attempts at creating a National Episcopal Service Program.

Just recently I was contacted by the current director of Johnson Intern Program which gave me an opportunity to reconnect with this cherished work. The program has grown from a capacity of five interns to now eight. And there is an official national Episcopal Service Program complete with a common application process. Several more programs have been developed in various parts of the country and the directors of the current programs are working on starting even more programs. When I was a college senior looking to do a service year, there were only a few programs available to me. They were disparate, knew of each other, but there wasn't any exchange of information or ideas between them. It is exciting for me to see how God has taken those small seeds and grown these programs through the development of relationships. Where once we gave lip service to the value of young adults in the Episcopal Church saying they were our future while pigeon-holing them into youth work, we now are pledging through programs and resources that young adults are a priority, with their own unique needs and challenges. The small seed that was planted God has grown, and spread all over the country.

On June 3rd, we marked the feast day of the martyrs of Uganda who were killed for refusing to renounce Christianity in 1886. Their martyrdom completely changed the growth of Christianity in Uganda. Originally, the missionaries were allowed to teach the Christian faith only to the immediate members of the court by order of the king. When his successor took the throne he became enraged to discover that the converts put their loyalty to the Christian faith above their loyalty to the king. And so, he resolved to wipe out Christianity, by killing these 32 young men. What is remarkable about their story is that while the king was trying to expel this foreign religion by ordering their death, what actually occurred as a result of the death of these faithful followers, was the exponential growth of Christianity in Uganda. The public example of faith exhibited by these men helped others to see that Christianity was an African faith, not just the faith of Anglo and European men. And now Uganda is the most Christian nation in Africa. The seed of faith exhibited in the lives of these few men led to many converts to the faith and the growth of the kingdom of God.

God takes these seeds of our faith, and without our even realizing it, without our even being aware of it, God grows these seeds into strong, large, intricately entwined bushes

that are the kingdom of God. Nurturing those seeds of faith requires that we move outside of ourselves, to move away from the weeds of our own self-interest, self-centeredness towards a new carnation of ourselves, a new way of viewing the world and interacting with it. In the epistle Paul reminds us, “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” The life of faith require that we turn towards community, and focus our lives on what is of ultimate worth. God sends us out into the world, to live and work in God’s world, loving our neighbors as ourselves. God calls us outside of ourselves into community to act and respond to one another with love.

I am sure many of you can share your own story of either planting a seed or of a seed being planted in you. Maybe it is the story of how you arrived here at All Saints’. In our conversations with one another, a common story I hear you tell is how a friend invited you to come to All Saints’ just to try it out. Maybe you put it off for a while, and the friend reminded you, you are always welcome to come, and so finally one Sunday you said okay. And before you even realized what was happening, you found that you had joined whole-heartedly into this community, and maybe even found those same words coming out of your mouth – inviting another friend to come and experience the joy and freedom and love that you have experienced in being a part of this community of faith.

This week we have been tending some very important seeds, as our children have delved deeper into the story of our faith as they romped and squealed and played and explored the story in vacation bible school. And if you have been following the blog of our Journey 2 Adulthood pilgrims, we can all read about the transformation that these young adults are experiencing as they devote time to their own spiritual development and continue to deepen their relationship with God and with one another. There are many seeds that have been planted in this fertile ground here at All Saints’, not just seeds among the young, but also seeds that strengthen our community on this campus through our EFM and GIFT groups or the seeds planted in the large crowds that come to hear our speakers for events like the Woodall Lecture. Or there are the seeds of Threads, Covenant Community, and our Refugee Ministries and our strong history of social justice; these seeds strengthen the community of Atlanta. And then there are the seeds of nurtured in our relationship with the Cathedral of Rio De Janiero, and in our work on the Millennium Development Goals. There are many, many ways both individually and collectively that we help to plant and spread the seeds that share God’s love throughout the world.

What’s important in these experiences that we have with one another and in these stories that we share, is not so much how many people we bring to All Saints’, nor how many Episcopal programs we grow, nor how many youth pilgrims we send on pilgrimage or children enroll in vacation bible school, or social justice ministries we start here; what is important is that we continue to share God’s love with those around us, through our actions. Today we are reminded that we must remain open to God acting in our lives, to God using us to plant new seeds to grow the Kingdom. Every day we make the conscious choice to live as Christians, which means that we choose to move away from focusing on ourselves and our own self-interest and instead take on the new

creation of Christ and in both word and action respond to one another with selfless love, that same selfless love that Jesus gave to us.

The challenge remains for us to continue to be open to opportunities to nurture seeds of faith and recognize when God is calling on us to share the love of Christ and grow the kingdom of God. God is continuing to plant those seeds to grow the kingdom. Are you nurturing those seeds God has planted in you to grow the kingdom?