

Finding an Opening

Text: St. Mark 4:26-34

It was Churchill, I believe, who was responsible for pointing out that any young man who is not a liberal hasn't got a heart, and that any old man who is not a conservative, hasn't got a brain. I am not sure that that is exactly the case. But I do know that as one grows older one's moral philosophy does tend to change, even if one's political philosophy doesn't. For example, oddly enough given their laxity in some other areas, along with their high idealism younger men and women tend to be rigorists and purists in morals. They particularly tend to be eagle eyed with respect to motives. They tend to think that people are supposed to have pure motives; they are worried above all about authenticity, and the horrors of hypocrisy. Indeed, authenticity is perhaps the highest ideal, although sometimes this means that they tailor their moral views to fit their motives, instead of the other way around. Still, they do assume that views and motives need to fit together hand in glove. As one gets older one starts to see it differently, however. This is especially true if one looks inwardly at all and learns anything about oneself from life experience. Such a person begins to recognize that motives and ideals do not fit so nicely together in our lives and probably never have. I know for myself once I hit middle age that I realized that were it not for mixed motives, I wouldn't have any motives at all.

Not that we are all just an unfiltered mixture of wanting several different things, high and low, all at the same time. That would be schizophrenic or simply confused or outrightly hypocritical. The problem is, rather, that as we get older many of us come to suspect that over the course of life some, if not a whole lot of our moral views really have been tailored to fit our own needs, that we were never quite as idealistic as we thought, or that our ideals were bought somewhat cheaply. Sometimes our parents just paid for them. We also come to realize that this

has probably always been the case, not only with us but with a whole lot of people. Thus we have to face up to the fact that we may not have lived up to our ideals, and maybe never fully lived up to them. We regret that.

But there is some good news in that regret. If we do regret it, then having mixed motives does not mean so much that we used to have a terrific moral life but have subsequently failed at it, and that we are now deliberate hypocrites; rather it means that, although we recognize that frequently we do things for selfish reasons, those reasons can be mixed with selfless ideals. We can still remain haunted by those ideals even if we have fallen short of them. So, having mixed motives can mean that although we do not always live up to those ideals, still we think about them; that at least leaves us the possibility that someday we might live up to them. If mixed motives convict us of a lack of perfect moral purity, they also at least suggest that we still would like to improve. They speak to the possibility that we can improve and that we are not completely morally insensible. They speak to the rather hard fact that having ideals and living up to them is the project of a life time, and even beyond. And finally, what is much more important is that they also can speak to the rather comforting belief preached by the Christian faith that God's Word starts small, and, even if it struggles in our lives, as long as it stays alive, it will change our lives and remake us in God's image. That is God's promise.

Now, to put things that way is just a complicated way of saying what Jesus taught in the parable of the mustard seed. For what Jesus tells his disciples when he teaches them that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, the smallest of seeds that grows into the greatest of bushes, is that very small things, things that might once have appeared to be insignificant in our lives, can turn out to be very significant. Our ideals, for example, may not have played the role we think they should have in our lives. But if we have them at all, and if we hold onto them at

all, they can turn our lives into something great.

Luther caught the spirit of this idea well when he said in an oft quoted sermon that he preached the Word, drank beer with his friends, and slept; and while he did nothing more, the Word did it all. Now, to be sure, the Word does things in its own time and not ours, as we find out soon enough. But it *is* sure, as Luther suggests, and it acts by its own action. That is why Jesus also taught in the other parable of today's Gospel lesson that the kingdom of God is as if someone were to scatter seed and sleep night and day, and while she does, the seed will sprout and grow. Once planted, the kingdom will sprout. As Isaiah said, God's word will not return empty to him.

Now, Luther was right to suggest this in such a provocative way. God's Word in us simply needs to be heard, and it grows on its own. Over the course of a career in ministry, I have constantly heard stories from parishioners about how late in life they came back to the faith that they had once heard about when much younger but had then deserted for a time. I am not talking here about the stories of those who came back because their second child had recently been born and thus they thought a round of baptisms was in order. I am talking about those people who had at some point in a life had found their successes in life to be rather empty and who then realized that there had to be something more, or those who had found either themselves or a family member in deep trouble and came here because they knew that there really was compassion and help and hope in the community of Christ's body. I think such stories are the main practical justification for baptizing children, for that sacramental act really can be like a mustard seed. It is a small act, done with a small child, and yet it can be the very means of a great call later in life, even much later in life.

But if Luther was right to talk about the self growth of God's Word in us, still that

doesn't mean that we don't do anything, nor does it mean that drinking beer with our friends is the means to letting God's Word grow in us. It certainly doesn't mean that we can *presume* upon God's Word, and never take care of the great gift we have been given. For while God's Word assuredly grows on its own, and changes our lives despite our chronic inability to change them ourselves, there are times that we can kill that growth if we do not foster it somehow, no matter how clumsy and inept we may be. If we are utterly negligent of God's gifts and God's love we can kill them in ourselves.

Let me give you an example. In Flannery O'Connor's novel *The Violent Bear It Away*, one of the main characters is a man by the name of George Rayber. He is a school psychologist, and a man of the Enlightenment who doesn't just disbelieve in God; he hates the idea of God. He thinks it is irrational and dangerous, a sort of mental infection. He thinks this in part because of his own experience with a relative who believed himself a prophet. Rayber has as a result consciously developed a stiff will to disbelieve anything that might suggest that there is anything like love or grace that permeates the world, that there is anything other than numbers and figures and causal explanations. The one chink, though, in Rayber's secularist armor is his unaccountable love for his retarded son, Bishop. Somehow, useless as Bishop is, his very being seems a gift that is to be honored and cared for. However, it becomes clear that Rayber actually fears this love, calling it a horrifying love. Why does he fear this love? Because, if he let it alone and let it grow, he knows that it might become all-encompassing, and that it would overcome his own will to disbelieve. Now, frequently, O'Connor says, this sense of irrational love would come upon Rayber; "anything could bring it – a stick or stone, the line of a shadow. If, without thinking, he lent himself to it, he would feel suddenly a morbid surge of the love that terrified him – powerful enough to throw him to the ground of idiot praise." However, each time it came

he successfully resisted it, and tamped it down. Each time, the hard rationalist in him regained control, and stilled the Word that tried to rise up in him.

The result? In time he lost the ability to feel real love or even pain. At best, his love even for his son was merely sentimental and self-indulgent, not clear and giving. This is seen when, near the end of the novel, Bishop is drowned. O'Connor relates Rayber's reaction: "The muscles in his face contracted and revealed lines of pain harder than bone. He set his jaw. No cry must escape him. The one thing he knew, the one thing he was certain of was that *no cry must escape him*...He stood there waiting for the raging pain, the intolerable hurt that was his due, to begin, so that he could ignore it, but he continued to feel nothing. He stood light-headed at the window, and it was not until he realized that there would be no pain that he collapsed." We can avoid pain, but only at the price of killing love.

Simone Weil once noted, rather like Luther, that "over the infinity of time and space the infinitely more infinite love of God comes to possess us. God comes at his own time. We have the power to consent to receive him or to refuse. If we remain deaf, he comes back again and again like a beggar, but also, like a beggar, one day he stops coming. If we consent, God places a little seed in us and he goes away again. From that moment God has no more to do; neither have we, except to wait... On the whole, the seed grows of itself. A day comes when the soul then belongs to God when it not only consents to love, but when truly and effectively it loves. Then in its turn it must cross the universe to go to God."

Yet, as she also notes, while the seed does grow by itself, it is still up to us to make sure that it can grow. Continuing the agricultural metaphor, this means that we need to pull up the weeds that threaten to choke it out, and we need to make sure that it gets the best available sun. What this means concretely within the religious life is that we need, for example, to avoid the

great intellectual enemies of the religious imagination: sentiment and superstition on the soft side, and cold rationalism on the hard side. But above all, it means that we need to get rid of the distractions that fill modern life, and that keep us from paying attention, that keep us from looking and receiving God's grace because we are too busy to let it into our lives. We need to do all that we can that keeps us from making ourselves available and that gives God's Word an opening in our lives.

God's kingdom is a gift of love and light. God even gives us all that we need to take that love and light into our lives. God, for example, continually gives us new gifts such as his Word read and preached and the Word in the sacrament of the eucharist to help the growth of the seed. As Calvin observed, the ministry of the sacraments is "for the confirmation and increase of faith." In all these ways, the seed grows in us by God's own action and not by ours. As long as we remain open to its action, we can have full assurance that it will grow, and that whatever failures we may have experienced in either the height of our ideals or the purity of our motives will not and cannot stop our being remade. If, however, we refuse to open ourselves and if we choose to not let the seed be fed, we may lose both pain and love.

Finding out how to give God's Word an opening in our lives, and keeping the weeds from choking out its growth is perhaps the great theological challenge to middle class Americans. Indeed, in this church's resumé in seeking for an installed pastor, there is a question to be answered about what this church thinks are the theological issues of our time. In one way, it is a question designed to smoke out whether a church is on the right or left. But it is an important question, and I think the PNC put its finger on the issue when it said: "We struggle with becoming a better priesthood of all believers in a world where people are pulled in many different directions...How do we celebrate and develop our gifts so that our commitment to

Christ becomes true ministry, not just another charitable or volunteer activity?" Indeed, how do we?

There are for us two great, but closely related challenges to letting the seed of the kingdom grow in us and in our community. The first is the distractions that keep us from making ourselves available. The noise level of the outside culture is constant, and its flashing lights are, too. But more exactly, our personal ambitions and wants and needs, which are really what most of the demands on our time are at their root, constantly distract us from paying attention. We would like to think they are fulfilling and that alongside our partial commitments to God that all together they contribute to a rich and varied life. In time, however, we discover these distractions are exactly why our motives are so mixed, and our real ideals so unfulfilled. Simply put, we discover that the more we give into them, the less available we become to the demands of God's Word. In that sense, our misguided sense of fulfillment is actually what is killing us.

The other challenge is a certain kind of carelessness and presumption on our part. We think we can get away with being distracted because we presume on God's grace. Because God is gracious, we sometimes act as if God weren't part of our lives at all, or that there is no problem in just giving God the leftovers. We assume all good people, or people who are good for the most part, go to heaven and that is good enough. Yet, the issue of the kingdom is, as John Wesley once suggested, not about getting us into heaven, it is about getting heaven into us. And that is where we need to be concerned and vigilant, and not careless, about making an opening for the seed. If we keep treating it as a small thing, it will end up as a small and even a non-existent thing in our lives.

But if we do make ourselves available, if even in halting and sometimes rather inept ways, if we actually believe that the kingdom of God is the most important thing of all, well, then

the kingdom will grow in us, all by itself. For that conviction is the seed. If we have it, it helps us ignore the noise and the lights. It gives us the ability to make ourselves always open to God, until he is fully and truly united to us in our minds and hearts and wills. And if we are so united to God, then, just as God once crossed the infinity of time and space to plant the seed in us, we will make the return journey. Just as we have been transformed, we, small as we are, will also transform the world.