

Spring has sprung, the grass has riz and it is now time for one of the gospel parables about seeds and mustard seeds. This week we also have a passage from Ezekiel thrown in for perspective. Parables are always more simple and more complex than they appear and this week is no exception.

In the Old Testament, in fact throughout the ancient Middle East, God or Gods were occasionally referred to as tall trees, towering over the landscape. Ezekiel uses this image of the cedar that gives shade and space to all manner of winged creatures as well as providing fruit. God will take ta small sprig and turn it into this mighty tree.

I wouldn't say that Jesus is poking fun at God although teasing your father on Father's Day might be considered appropriate. Jesus doesn't talk about growing large cedars instead he talks about mustard seeds and bushes. It's one of those kingdom reversal moments in which Jesus is reminding us that God's real power is not revealed in earthly values, instead of the mighty cedar Jesus is talking about the lowly mustard bush, almost a wild weed that nevertheless has an impact beyond our wildest imaginings. The other parable has to do with seed that is scattered and then manages to ripen in ways that the sower cannot comprehend.

This can help us to reflect on how we never know really know how what we have done has taken root or how powerful its impact will be.

Sometimes however we are privileged and humbled to learn that what we have done has meant far more than we ever imagined.

One such instance sticks in my mind because of how improbable the whole experience felt at the time. You may or may not know that as seminarians we are required to spend one summer doing Clinical Pastoral Education. For most of us it mean 10 weeks of traipsing around a hospital visiting people, learning to pray and talk with the sick and the dying and their family members. We are coached and trained in this process by an experienced chaplain and given time to process our experiences in a small training group in which we listen to the stories of our encounters and challenge each other in terms of what we did or did not do. It is a grueling experience, rather like spiritual boot camp. In most instances we have only been in seminary for a year and the idea is to expose us to challenging and sometimes threating situations to make us come to terms with our own strengths and weaknesses. The most dreaded part of this program for me at least was the on-call overnights. In my program when I arrived for an on-call overnight I spent the usual day but then was on-call throughout the hospital for the time from 5:00 till 8:00 the next morning. I would wander the different wards from the NICU to the ER looking for people who wanted prayer or to talk until most places grew dark as patients wanted to sleep. We were given a room for ourselves in which to sleep and a pager to alert us when someone was in need. Needless to say nighttime pages were not requests to talk but usually emergency situations and sleep was sporadic at best. Then the day began again at 8:00 and I would go home, finally at the end of the next day. The responsibility was heavy because how I responded in any given situation would reflect not only on me but on my trainer and the whole program.

It was early in the evening of my first overnight when I was called to a family gathering room of the ER where a patient had been brought in in cardiac arrest and had died. His family

had gathered and to say that they were distraught was an understatement. The room was packed with at least 20 people and relatives who were not in the room were outside, talking on cell phones, sobbing into cell phones. The man who had died had just retired and the family had celebrated his retirement just a few weeks before. My first reaction was one of sheer panic. Here I was armed with only a limp and rumpled paper with a few suggested prayers at time of death, wondering how I was supposed to wade into the middle of this grief stricken family. To top it all off the family was African-American and their cultural expression of grief was far more emotional than anything I had ever experience in my family of origin. I had no idea of what to do, I wanted to be useful, to live into my calling but in the moment I felt completely helpless, inadequate, and useless. My only other experience of death had been with my mother when she had died and that had been a private affair at which only my father and I had been present. Eventually my brothers and their wives had arrived at the house and we sat around staring at each other. The active expressing of grief, tears, and wailing was completely alien to me.

Later I would learn that there are no magic words, there is nothing to be said, and that the important thing is just being present, but that wasn't my experience in the moment.

I remember praying desperately for guidance, have no recollection of doing more than patting a shoulder, maybe giving a hug, I don't even remember saying any prayers. I just remember standing there and looking and grieving for the family in their grief. Eventually the family's pastor arrived and I left to continue on my rounds.

Most days during CPE were not that dramatic but those on-call overnights usually had something happen to rock my sense of being in control. I remember being with a non-English speaking family whose baby had died and trying to explain why I couldn't baptize the baby, retrieving a ring from a body in the morgue, being asked to remove the breathing tube of someone who had died (no I did not), and being trapped in the ER doing a lockdown when a gang member was admitted.

Later that summer after I had had some successes and some failures as a chaplain in training I was walking down a hallway and saw a woman coming toward me who stopped and said hello to me. She said "I was "so and so's" sister" You were there the night he died. Oh, I said thinking back to that awful night, I am sorry, how is your family doing? I offered my condolences and then she said to me "I remember you from that night because your face was so kind".

Huh.

Thanks be to God something had gone right with my reaction that night, something small that was powerful enough that it registered with at least one of the people who was grieving.

"The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground...and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how." The kingdom of God "is like a mustard seed,...the smallest of all the seeds on the earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all the shrubs."

Now it wouldn't be appropriate to neglect to acknowledge Father's on this father's day so I would like to take this time to wish happy Father's day to all of us children so that we might express our appreciation for those who have been a father to us in any way shape or form.

As for me, the punchline for this story is that it is because my father shared the mustard seed of his faith with me as a child that I had a lifeline through the many years before I found my vocation. I was blessed to be able to share my thanks publicly for this gift in a toast when we celebrated his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday with a large number of friends and family.

As Jesus said, God can transform the smallest of seeds; do not neglect to sow where you can because those little seeds can make a huge difference.

Amen