

Homily, June 16, 17, 2018

Mark 4:26-34

From Seed to Bush: Germination starts with our wounds

A couple of weeks ago my wife, Jill, and I visited Taos, New Mexico, for our 37th wedding anniversary. We went down to the Taos town plaza for the farmer's market to experience all that is "Taos." Many of the shops around the plaza are high end jewelry and art stores. But in the corner of the square is a T-shirt shop. In the window of that shop a t-shirt was displayed of a small alien flying saucer hovering over a large bovine, with little retractable lines pointing toward the cow as if the craft were trying to abduct it and bring it on board. Above this depiction was one large word: "BELIEVE."

Now, I'm not quite sure what that was all about. Believe in what? Believe that UFO's exist? Believe in alien life? Perhaps there's Taos folklore about a bovine alien abduction. I don't know. But it did occur to me that that t-shirt was saying something about what I wanted to preach on today.

There's one interpretation of today's parable that goes something like this: if I would just BELIEVE a little bit, as little as a mustard seed, my faith would grow into something like a lovely bush, big enough for birds to nest in. My faith would grow into something miraculous. Well, if you're like me, belief alone does not cause me to blossom into the creature God intends me to be any more than I can will alien life into existence by simply believing that it exists. As Sophocles said, "What people believe sometimes seems to prevail over the truth."

I would suggest that, rather than BELIEF, it may be more helpful to think in terms of "wisdom." Among all the other things that Jesus was, he was a teacher of wisdom. The wisdom tradition, also called the perennial philosophy or the perennial tradition, flourished throughout the ancient East, from Egypt to the Mesopotamian region, Assyria and the Aramaic speaking areas. It tended to ignore national boundaries and religious dogma and distill what is common teaching among the major diverse religious traditions. The wisdom tradition offers us teaching for successful living by providing practices to help bring our lives into alignment with God's purposes. It is more humanist

spirituality than religion. Wisdom literature exists in the Bible as the Apocryphal Books: Job, Proverbs, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, among others. There is much wisdom literature that exists outside the Bible.

Wisdom teachers would often take examples from their time and culture to illustrate a point. The mustard plant is common in Palestine and surrounding area. And Jesus used its seed to describe the Kingdom of God which, he said, “when sown upon the ground, will sprout and put forth large branches so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.” He’s comparing the Kingdom of God to a seed. Since Jesus started with a seed, let’s look at a seed.

I don’t have a mustard seed, but here’s a chia seed. Can you see it? It is so full of potential. The DNA for the mature plant is fully contained within it. It’s amazing, really. And though it’s little, it’s much larger than the union of the ovum and sperm from which each of us came into being. I’ve heard a seed described as a child in a suitcase carrying its lunch. The “baby” refers to the embryo that will grow and develop; the

“suitcase” is the seed coat that surrounds and protects the seed and

“lunch” refers to the nutritive source for the germinating seedling.

Here’s a very large school bus full of children in suitcases carrying their lunches (hold up seed pod).

The seed lies dormant until environmental conditions are ripe for its germination. I read where a mustard seed can lie dormant for 50 years and still germinate. A seed is always “awake” in the sense that it is perfectly attuned to its environment. It “surrenders” in the sense that it accepts whatever environmental conditions are present. If environmental conditions are ripe, the seed germinates. If not, it doesn’t. Usually it’s merely the presence of water and sunshine. Other seeds have different triggering mechanisms. But whatever the triggering mechanism, the seed is awake to it. Once the seed germinates, it grows by dividing itself millions of times at the cellular level to grow into a mature plant.

The seed has to germinate in order to grow. And there’s the crux of the parable for me. How do we spiritually germinate and ripen?

We are planted in whatever soil, whatever conditions, that exist in our life that we find ourselves at any given time. Sometimes the soil is rocky, hard and dry — full of pain, fear, anxiety, loneliness, bitterness, frustration, or despair, depending upon what's going on in our lives. Perhaps it's the loss of a loved one, or a marriage, or a job, or our health. Many times it's these external conditions of our lives that create the emotions we feel.

Often it's the internal condition of our thoughts that create the feelings we feel, by continually obsessing over past hurts, losses, problems. Sometimes it seems we are assailed by our thoughts and feelings, as if they were demons on the attack. Sometimes our emotions run amuck, our reactions totally out of proportion to the reality we are actually experiencing. And we contribute to that ratcheting up by obsessing over the circumstance in our lives that gave rise to the feeling in the first place. Sometimes our thoughts are compulsive, as with various forms of addiction, and it feels as if we have no control over our impulses.

These are the conditions of our lives, the soil in which each of our spiritual seeds has been planted. Now, if Jesus is using the germinating seed to describe the Kingdom of God within us and among us, then we need to understand how to till the soil to encourage the seed to grow. For the seed, it's easy. A little water and sunshine and it's off to miraculous self-actualization. For us human beings, the process is more complicated. As Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said, "We are a multiplicity of human energies." That was his way of saying we're complicated. To become the person God intends me to be, I must learn to integrate this negative side of me, my "shadow self," as the great psychologist C. J. Jung called it, into my being. This is the part of me that always wants to be right, that blames others, that's fearful. I must first affirm and acknowledge my shadow side as a part of who I am and understand it's role in shaping my life.

My wife will get a kick out of that statement. I'm pretty good at denying things, at not dealing with certain feelings, at pretending they don't exist. It's a coping mechanism, right? So, I'm preaching to myself as much as to anyone else.

So, working with your shadow is an important way of tilling the soil to allow the seed within us to grow. How is this shadow work done? By being brutally honest with ourselves and courageously facing our negative thoughts and emotions. This is the work that the desert fathers and mothers did when they fled to the deserts of Egypt, Syria, Arabia and Palestine saying that what was going on in the Church back in Rome had little to do with the wisdom that Jesus taught. These desert monks lived on the frontiers of their thoughts and emotions. Have you ever just sat with your shadow self? It's not easy. The ancient religious literature, particular in the New Testament, sometimes described the "demons" that seem to attack us when we do that. But that's what the desert fathers and mothers did, they sat with their thoughts and feelings, by themselves and together in their communities. You have to be a warrior to do that. It's much easier just to ignore them; act as if they don't exist; sweep them under the rug and tell them not to bother you anymore. But of course they will. They always do, usually stronger than before. And as the monks sat with themselves, amazing things happened. When they invited the Holy

Spirit in to commune with them and their demons, they got perspective. They were able to find the root cause of their distress. Their minds quieted. They made peace with their demons and with themselves. They found wisdom. This practice is an ancient prayer form called the Welcoming Prayer. It allows for spiritual fulfillment by integrating the totality of our life's experience. It's not just naval gazing. It is awakening to our environment in order to fulfill our personhood. It is tilling the soil, and allowing Living Water to flow into us.

For us to gain the Living Water, as Jesus described, our souls must go through a sort of crucifixion and resurrection. Eckhart Tolle said the crucified Christ is a poignant metaphor for what each human soul has to go through. The jewel is found inside our wounds. So our wounds are not our enemies; they point the way toward healing if we do the work.

Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest and prolific writer, said it this way. When I was a child growing up in the church, I was taught about the "Incarnation" with a capital "I": The Divine incarnating in

the person of Jesus to show us His love and grace. That is so essential and beautiful. But, Ms. Taylor goes on to say this. As I grew older, and wiser, I learned that there is “incarnation” with a small “i”. Each of us is an incarnated child of God and, as such, we have a spiritual responsibility to become mature in our Christian faith in order to spread God’s love and mercy on the earth, here and now. We are called to become “Little Christs,” in the words of C.S. Lewis. Our faith is not an escape hatch, or a private salvation project (as Thomas Merton called it), to bail out of our responsibilities to this discordant and sometimes terrifying world. We are called to continue the healing ministry of Jesus. We can only do that if we ourselves are healed in the furnace of self reflection and prayer.

I’d like to read you a poem by a woman named Christine Sherwood. The poem is called “Right Now.” When she wrote the poem, she was suffering from cancer and her prognosis was uncertain. Her book of poems is called, “Help Me Remember Who I Am.”

“I want to live in peace.

I am so weary of making people, places and events something I must be at war with.

The violence of my perceptions must end.

No one ever attacked me except in their own ignorance.

No event was placed in my path that the initial duty of the moment must go on for a lifetime.

I can no longer carry the burden of my self-righteousness.

I surrender to the fullness of my being.

How sad to see that I have been resisting the ease-full rising of peace.

Truly...even this...even this I fight.

I view this battlefield and admit to my own madness.

Now is the time to reside in the sanity of open space.

No hope of winning.

No fear of losing.

I am here because I am here.

That is where the balance resides.

The image of perfecting the scene with a death will never be.

All attempts to force the view into fairness will never be either.

These fruitless dressings in their impressive armor only serve to fuel
my most ardent enemy.

The truth in me knows the war is won on the interior field.

I want to wrap this particular self in a blanket of the softest lambswool
and

Invite her to my fire and allow her to be here without being gathered up
by her unconscious forces.

The gentleness of embracing the totality of me fills my veins with
warmth and

In my belly is the pure reflection of a full moon on a still midnight pond.
Ahh.

There it is.

I am living in peace.”

It seems to me that's the recognition of the saints. In Jesus' words, we
are found in our lost-ness. Divine unity is found in the recognition of
our brokenness. There's integration with God when we find the true
ground of our being, in the open spaces of our interior battlefield, where

our heart and God's heart become aligned. It's the only place where the spiritual seed can germinate and ripen into the kind of people God wants us to become. Here. Now.