

“There’s Nothing Wrong with Mustard”

Pastor Dan Harrison (7/8/18) and Pastor Bev Cosby (1/13/02), Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, VA

In Mark 4, Jesus gives a fabulous analogy what the Kingdom of God is like, when he compares it to a mustard seed that grows from the tiniest of things to be proportionately huge—that it goes from such insignificance in size to quite significant, and even more so in its utilitarian nature. Jesus mentions that it’s an excellent home to birds building their nests. What isn’t mentioned in the text, but I like to think was completely understood by all those listening at the time, is that the “mustard tree” is super versatile, and is exceptionally useful, not only as a home for birds, but it provides cool, refreshing shade for humans and other animals suffering from the Middle East’s raging sun-filled heat. When the sun is bearing down on you 120 (F) degrees strong, sucking all hydration from your pores, the shade of the Mustard Tree becomes in that moment vital, life-saving. Then when the desert heat turns into freezing temperatures at night, reaching below 20 (F) degrees, your body craves heat again—desperate to keep your core temperature up, to stay alive. Thank God for the Mustard Tree, whose loose bark makes for some of the best charcoal, keeping heat for hours, and supplying the warmth we need to combat the cold desert winds after nightfall. The heat it can produce is legendary. However, it’s most interesting feature, the one you will find instantly on the internet with a simple Google search of its latin name “*Salvadora persica*” (or Mustard Tree), is that its loose bark makes one of the worlds first and best natural tooth brushes. Yes! Its stringy bark is ideal for getting the hard-to-reach places of the mouth, and has been doing so for thousands of years now. Its utilitarian nature is almost without equal, they say its flowers when in bloom create the sweetest aroma—one which instantly creates visions of opulence and elegance, whose fragrance evokes an almost euphoric peace with its calming scent. And we have yet to even touch on the word “mustard” itself, the spice its leaves produce when in their dried state. When mixed with vinegar, water, and oil, the “mustard” we are most familiar with becomes a rich spice that makes most any food even better. When I was a kid, I loved mustard. My spice of choice. When I would eat my hamburger, I just wanted mustard (and even today I occasionally order that wonderful recipe on my burger for nostalgia’s sake). Even for a time, I would eat my french fries with mustard instead of ketchup. It seemed mustard just made everything better. Certainly, Jesus didn’t use the Mustard Tree as an example for the Kingdom of God solely based on the size of the seed and its incredible outgrowth, which is phenomenal in and of itself. No, Jesus also alluded to its utilitarian nature—how it grows to provide for life (in this case a home for the birds), but there is no doubt the people at the time realized the full nature of the example. This tree provided so much more!

(Bev’s last sermon 1/13/2002)

“The past two Sundays we have raised the question: What is your vision for the New Year? Your inward vision, your outward vision? Your vision of your own selfhood, who you want to be and become? Your vision of those who touch your life, -family, friends, enemies? What do you see in and hope for them? Your vision for the structures in which you live and work and to which you probably give the largest segment of your time and energy? What do you vision for these structures? What do you hope for them? And finally, what do you envision for our nation? What does your heart cry out for in our country? And beyond our own country – for our world, for God’s world? For all God’s children?”

That's a big question with many facets. If we want to keep alert, awake, and alive, - we will want to work with it one piece at a time, day by day, all year long: 'Where there is no vision, the people perish. They fade away, and we die on the inside with them.'

I. The first is my vision in relation to my SELF.

Gerald May wrote a fine article several years ago entitled GENTLENESS in which he pleads for each of us to be more gentle on ourselves. We down ourselves and become our own worst enemy, and then turn vengeance onto others...

I envision this year taking a new step toward gentleness. If by God's grace I can be more gentle on myself, surely that will spill over and I will be more gentle on others. Jesus said, "The first commandment is to love God with our whole being." That never changes. He said, "Love your neighbor as yourself." This is not an ego selfishness focused on protecting our fearful, possessive, anxious self. It is rather being gentle on ourselves, loving our true self, asking and waiting for God's grace to transform our fear into love, our clutching into giving, and trusting God's abundance, and in time to empower us to lead those around us out of their black holes of darkness and despair.

Judy Bork gave me a small book on her arrival earlier this week entitled: "I Will Not Die an Unlived Life", (Reclaiming Purpose and Passion), by Dawna Markova. I leafed through it quickly and paused at the epilogue at the end. There was a quotation by Parker Palmer introducing the Epilogue which said, "Self-care is never a selfish act – it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer to others. Anytime we can listen to true self, and give it the care it requires, we do so not only for ourselves, but for the many others whose lives we touch."

My inward vision for my "self" at the threshold of this New Year is that of moving to a new level of gentleness, a new level of caring for self, the true self, and making good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer to others. I envision life becoming more simple, more ordered, more centered in prayer and intercession, and maybe more leisurely (but this may be a wish-dream given my calling). By "simple" – "ordered" – and "centered" does not mean easier.

When someone asked my brother Gordon twenty or thirty years ago how his life was going, he answered: "Better and better, and harder and harder!" That's a realistic, true paradox for those of us rooted in Biblical faith, and who belong to Jesus whose coming we have celebrated and affirmed.

In our kind of world, and with our kind of rootedness in God's eternal love as we know it in Jesus, life naturally gets better and better as we go deeper and deeper, and at the same time it gets harder and harder because we are more in touch with the depth of evil and suffering rampant in our society and world. And also we are more in touch with the realism of the limitations of our own capacities and inadequacies, and especially with the diminishments of life that come inevitably with age as we prepare in our later years for our passing fully, totally, into the loving arms of God who is waiting with excitement and joy to receive us to begin the next phase of our pilgrimage. And if we are ready, both we and our friends and family will look forward to it with hope and expectation.

For some of us our time will be shortened by illness, accident, unanticipated suffering and what we call pre-mature death. Our awareness of the human condition heightens and becomes more acute, while at the same time our consciousness of God's presence in and around us deepens, and we know

the 'peace that passes all understanding' at the same time. That's a bit of my vision for mySELF in the final quarter of the game.

II. *What is my vision in relation to others who touch my life, family friends, enemies, and all who are indifferent?*

My vision for this New Year for every human being is his or her full potential. Of course I do not know what that full potential is in specific detail. Only God knows. But I know one thing. One thing about the nature of creation. I know that every acorn has within it the essence of an oak tree. That essence contains its potential. I don't have to try to change or impose anything on its nature. That is already there. What I have to do is to remember that it is there, and it has not yet come forth and materialized, and that everyone's potential is slightly different in shape and size and beauty and usefulness.

Then all I have to do is to provide the environment in which that essence of the oak tree can break through its shell, begin to put down its roots, be watered and nurtured and become what it is already destined to become. This is the one thing I know about every person who comes in contact with me, whoever one is or whatever one looks like or acts like. For an acorn or a mustard seed—the environment is nutritious soil, water and light. For a human being it is God, love and forgiveness which is the ultimate expression of real love.

It's wonderful – pure joy – to watch the potential unfold and take shape in any human being. It is acutely painful to watch that potential be thwarted, crushed and lost.

We can elaborate on this at length, but its essence is very simple. Every man at the Gateway, every woman at Miriam's House, every child at EELC or in a L'Arche home, every inmate in every prison – is potential wrapped in human flesh and bone. I want my vision to be able to see that and to respond to that potential, and to ask God how I can call it forth and be a small, part of its happening, by providing in my person the environment – soil, water, light – in which it can grow."

We are the kingdom of God. We are the Mustard Tree—and don't let anyone tell you there's anything wrong with Mustard.