

Sermon for The Third Sunday after Pentecost, 6/13/2021

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Mark 4:26-34

As I have been reflecting through the week on the Gospel for today, I've found myself continually drawn to a conversation I recently had. Not long ago, I got to meet with the regular bereavement group I've managed the last four or five years for the first time in person since the pandemic began. It was special not only because we were getting to see one another for the first time since the pandemic began, having only spoken over the phone in recent history, but it was special too because we all realized this was the first time any of us had shared a gathering and a meal at someone's home outside of our bubble as we gathered at one of our member's homes. Arriving at our friend's home, we walked by her front garden and through her door, blessed with the images of her children and family in photographs along with knick-knacks and the glass plate ware she had set before us that our group could share a meal and this space together in her home as light spring rain drizzled upon the green grass of her yard. So it was that we sat together, having hugged and joyfully given our hellos that we began to talk about our lives.

While there were many blessings of that conversation, it is one particular piece of it that I'm thinking of today, a conversation with a woman named Mary who comes to the group remembering her husband who died some years ago. As we sat around the table that day, Mary told us that she would soon be selling her and her deceased husband's summer home in northern Wisconsin, a result of her increased age and her community there beginning to shrink, and that this summer would be her last summer there. This home in Wisconsin is where Mary has travelled each summer that I have known her, and where she has travelled and spent much of her life over the years. Mary told us that her husband had poured all of himself into this home, a place for him and Mary and their family, a place that holds the memories and accumulated bric-a-brac representative of years gone by. Mary intends to sell the house and in doing so, say goodbye to another piece of her life and her husband.

Speaking about this final summer, she noted a feeling that the meaning and story of this house; of her experience of living with her husband there, is a story she finds others don't necessarily hear or hold that often; a story she finds difficult to find space to share. As I heard her, she felt as though the world moves on and her own story and the significance of those years in that wooded cabin in Wisconsin, that home into which she and her husband poured their love and lives will be relegated to the past and insignificance.

Mary's experience stirred conversation as we reflected on our own relevance in the world, some speaking to feeling less relevant or meaningful because of their age, or infirmity. Mary made me consider different ways I have feared irrelevance, moments of feeling outcast growing up, of wishing for community, or romance, or understanding which seemed impossible to find. She raised, I think, a pretty human and pretty vulnerable question, "Do I matter?"

And, at least as I read the Gospel this morning, the answer is, "Of course you do. You matter more than perhaps you will ever know."

The impact of our action and lives, their value is infinite before God, and I believe are indeed seen and held by the human lives around us, and I'm spurred in this belief by Jesus' parables of the seeds. The imagery of the scattered seed that becomes the full head of grain, the picture of the mustard seed that becomes the tree, defies the messages of our world that our lives and our actions are somehow less than, are without place, or insignificant. Our gospel today reminds us that the seemingly insignificant often houses the unexpectedly meaningful. And I find this to be the consistent message of the Gospel: that from the tiny mustard seed the tree sprouts which gives rest to the birds of the air, that the first will be last and the last first, that the least of the world are the most beloved by God, that in the finite man Jesus lived the infinite divine.

The Gospel and our communal faith convicts me in the belief that each person is significant and that our lives and actions mean something. That in each of our days we can delight in God's will and walk in God's ways to affect good on the earth for ourselves and one another, to believe that, to quote Archbishop Desmond Tutu, "those little bits of good [we do] put together overwhelm the world."

Yet it's not just the ideals preached in scripture or the pulpit that convict me, it's Mary. Since my meeting with Mary, I have reflected on her goodness overwhelming me. It would be naïve and dare I say, irresponsible, to dismiss the loss she faces. The loss of a husband, of a home, of a place in which are suffused the memories of a life, is painful and indeed a loss. Yet the seed planted when our relationship began years ago has flourished such that these stories and experiences of loss mean something to me, mean something to those gathered around that table. Despite the difficulty, each of us rested in that loss with Mary – bearing witness and loving her as we had been loved.

Mary's meaning, her value and life in spite of its losses has impacted me more than I could have ever suspected, so too have a myriad other lives and actions. Think for yourself, whose goodness has lasted with you? What teacher made you feel seen when you were a child? What family member's lesson do you hold to, using their example to love others? What small act of kindness have you witnessed from a stranger or from a friend which you still remember and hold to this day?

And what hubris would it be to believe that for all those who have lovingly impacted our lives, somehow we each might not have impacted someone for the better?

Mary's goodbye to her home is sad. So too are the moments we grieve to which we have said goodbye or when we grieve something we wish we might have had, those moments in which we may feel irrelevant, isolated, or despairing. Though painful, such loss or hurt does not make her or anyone less significant or valuable. One of the gifts of our lives is that we, like the seeds which do not know what they will become, we don't always get to see what our actions and relationships will mean to others. The Good Samaritan does not see the life of the traveler he saved, nor did Moses make it to the Promised Land to see his people prosper. But their actions, ours too, have resonance.

My hope today is that you wonder how you may have felt someone feel inspired or healed or known or loved, to wonder how you have employed that sense of Christ planted within yourself to reach out to Christ in another. And I hope you can take that wondering to help motivate your goodness day by day, knowing that your goodness matters. Amen.