

Christ Episcopal Church

2 Emerson Street

East Norwalk, Connecticut 06855

Proper 6 (B)

June 17, 2018

DRAFT

“Look not down on the poor and lowly”

8 AM and 10 AM Sermons

by the Rev. Joe Parrish

The Holy Gospel according to

Mark 4:26-34

Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

Jesus also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on

earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Dear Lord, help us to see that the small and inconspicuous are mighty in your eyes.
Amen.

Today is Father's Day. How important are fathers! Someone has done statistics on how children respond to coming to church with their fathers. If accompanied by their father, a person has over a 70 percent chance of being a church goer when they become an adult. So, fathers are vitally important to the upbringing of their children and securing their sense of morality.

Henri Nouwen, the late Roman Catholic theologian said that to care, to care, is (quote) "to enter the world of those who are broken and powerless and to establish there a fellowship of the weak; to care is to

embrace affectionately those who are touched by hostile hands, to listen attentively to those whose words are otherwise only heard by greedy ears, and to speak gently with those who are accustomed to harsh orders and impatient requests; caring is to be present to those who suffer and to stay present even when nothing can be done to change their situation.” (unquote)

Fathers that care will change the whole world. Mothers that care will also change the whole world. Churches that care for Fathers and Mothers will change the whole world, and themselves in the process.

“We are Kingdom workers, not Kingdom bringers or Kingdom savers. We plant the seeds and we prepare for the harvest, whenever it suddenly bursts from the earth.”

-(by the Rev. Stephen McKinney-

Whitaker is pastor/head of staff of United Presbyterian Church in Peoria, IL, 2015)

http://day1.org/6625-big_enough

Ron Hall and Denver Moore tell this story: “The day the elderly Mr. Ballantine was shoved out of a car and deposited on the doorstep of a homeless shelter, another homeless man named Denver offered to

help. In response, the drunken Ballantine spat out curses and racial slurs. Denver helped him anyway.

“Even more than he hated people of color, Mr. Ballantine hated Christians...so much so that he would rather have starved than endure chapel sermons to obtain a free meal at the shelter. When Denver went through the serving line, he'd always get a second plate and take it upstairs to Mr. Ballantine.

“Denver continued taking meals to Ballantine even after the older man had been moved to government-run nursing home two

miles away. When Ballantine's room was messy and unclean, as it often was, Denver cleaned the room and its occupant. Each time he came to visit, Mr. Ballantine cursed Denver and called him names.

One day a friend, Mr. Scott, went with Denver to visit Mr. Ballantine. He asked the old man if he could get him anything.

“Ensure and cigarettes,” the man said.

Denver and the friend went to a nearby drugstore to purchase the items. The friend sent Denver back to the nursing home alone.

Here's how Denver relates his conversation with Mr. Ballantine in the book

titled, 'Same Kind of Different As Me':

"When I went back to Mr. Ballantine's room, he asked me who paid for the cigarettes and I told him Mr. Scott. 'How am I going to pay him back?' he asked. I said, 'You don't.' 'Why would that man buy me cigarettes when he doesn't even know me?' 'Cause he's a Christian.' 'Well, I still don't understand. And anyway, you know I hate Christians.'

"I didn't say [anything] for a minute, just sat there in a ole orange plastic chair and watched Mr. Ballantine lyin' there in his bed. Then I said to him, 'I'm a Christian.'

“I wish you coulda’ seen the look on his face. It didn't take but a minute for him to start apologizing for cussin’ Christians all the time I'd knowed him. Then I guess it hit him that while I'd been takin care of him--it was about three years by then--he'd still been callin' me names. ‘Denver, I'm sorry for all those times I called you [names],’ he said. ‘That's okay,’ Denver replied.

Then I took a chance and told Mr. Ballantine that I'd been takin’ care of him all that time, ’cause I [knew] God loved him. ‘God's got a special place prepared for you

if you just confess your sins and accept the love of Jesus.’

“I ain't gon' kid you,” he was skeptical. Same time, though, he said he didn't think I'd lie to him. “But even if you aren't lying,” he said, “I've lived too long and sinned too much for God to forgive me.”

“He laid there in that bed and lit up one a Mr. Scott's cigarettes, starin' up at the ceiling, smoking and thinking. I just kept quiet. Then all of a sudden he piped up again. “On the other hand, I'm too...old for much more sinning. Maybe that'll count for something!”

“Well, Mr. Ballantine stopped callin’ me [names] that day. And wadn't too long after that I wheeled him through the doors at McKinney Bible Church...We sat together on the back row, and it was the first time Mr. Ballantine had ever set foot in a church. He was 85 years old. After the service, he looked at me and smiled. ‘Real nice,’ he said.”

(a story told by Ron Hall and Denver Moore, *Same Kind of Different As Me*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006, 162-3.)

-(story retold by the Rev. Dr. Kimberleigh Buchanan is pastor of Pilgrimage United Church of Christ in Marietta, Georgia, 2009)

http://day1.org/1325-noisy_spring

Parables have a set of variables and elements, and some try to make exact connections to someone, like God and Jesus.

But “Figuring out what each element represents is problematic for several reasons. First, it assumes that we can get in the mind of Jesus, which is always more difficult than

it seems. Usually it ends up that what Jesus is thinking is exactly what I would be thinking if I were Jesus, and rather than conforming my will to God's I accomplish the opposite. Second, it assumes that there were meanings to these things in the first place. Jesus could be painting broad brush strokes rather than offering point by point analogies. Third, we are bothered and conditioned by years and years of people who are so certain that they know what is going on and their answers stick with us and prevent us from seeing beyond them.

“Certainly some of the things that I would like to question are those very assumptions of the past. Generally, they equate the sower with God, and the seed with the word, and finally, we become the harvest or the branches of the mustard tree. I think these assumptions must be challenged, especially since those readings have been rendered unlikely by the work of scholars like Malina and Rohrbaugh (authors of “A Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels”). They suggest that there are better ways to read these texts

and their argument is compelling enough to give it a shot.



“One of the things that Jesus parables point to is a need for a larger vision. They talk around the concept of God’s coming kingdom rather than defining it precisely so that we are forced to expand what we think. Our God is infinite and creative, always doing the unanticipated thing in unexpected ways. Rather than locking us into one way of thinking, Jesus is trying to open our eyes, hearts and minds to new possibilities and grander plans.

“Certainly our two parables for today help us to understand just that. No one can anticipate what the harvest might be at the time seeds are sewn and scattered on the ground. Even the sower does not know how it happens (so much for the sower being God in this parable). But when the grain is ready, it is harvested. We see that things happen, but we don’t know how, we simply trust that they do. The mustard seed, the smallest of seeds, does not reveal, when first seen, the size and scope of the plant that will grow. Yet it becomes a great bush,

sheltering other of God's creatures in its branches.

“Both of these stories reveal that the kingdom of God comes, without our working on it, and quite outside of our anticipated outcomes, and yet it comes anyway. God is at work, even when we don't see where or how or why. And the outcome is much grander than we could have imagined. Of course, this is God's very being that is being described. God is gracious, giving the gift of harvest and kingdom alike, and extravagant, as both come in abundance. God looks beyond the

self, providing produce for the farmer, and shade for the nesting birds. God is connected to the creation renewed and restored. God is active and involved in the unfolding of this kingdom even when we don't see it or get it.



“Certainly, the disciples didn't see it or get it in Mark's Gospel. They remained blissfully clueless to the end, even after Jesus was raised from the dead. They did not understand and were afraid for most of the time (one only need to read forward one [chapter in Mark] to see that). In then end

faithful Israel is reduced to one, Jesus himself. And yet from that one, a movement began that has swept the world and changed it with God's love. There may be more to these parables, than meets the eye indeed. The disciples had Jesus with them, explaining everything to them, and still they did not get it. How in the world can we hope to be better?

“And yet, we don't have to be, at least not according to these parables. God is bringing his kingdom, his harvest, his mustard seed to full growth and fruit, despite our lack of participation or

understanding, despite the fact that we often don't get it, or when we do, we get it wrong. Jesus speaks in parables as a mercy to us, really, when it comes down to it. He tells us enough to get us on board, to hold out a vision for a different world in which God's kingdom or rule will indeed become the reality for all creation, even though we don't see it at any given moment. And we participate in that vision as we grow in God's love and live God's forgiveness for the Sinful self and the Sinful world (perhaps even in spite of them). For now, we live it,

the fullness of understanding will come later.

“This is all very difficult for me, and perhaps for you too. I want to understand, I want to know, I want to see. And yet my brain is just too small to take it all in. So, for now, I will have to simply trust that, without my knowing or understanding, God’s kingdom is taking shape, God’s name is being hallowed, God’s will is being done, even as I pray every day. For now, I will simply have to trust that what looks small and ineffective to me at the moment will become something greater than I could ever

imagine. And in trusting I begin to participate in the very kingdom that is coming, and growing, and becoming God's love in the world.

-by Rev. Dr. Luke Bouman, Tree of Life

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<http://www.theologie.uzh.ch/predigten/archiv-8/060618-5-e.html>

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‘The winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, began her orphanage with such a vision. She told her superiors, “I have three pennies and a dream From God to build an orphanage.”

‘A dream and three pennies represented resources as small as a mustard seed.

““Mother Teresa,” her superiors chided gently, “you cannot build an orphanage with three pennies...with three pennies you can't do anything.”

““I know,” she said, smiling, “but with God and three pennies I can do anything.””

-quoted by the late Rev. Dr. Hugh L. Eichelberger who was a counselor and minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1996

http://day1.org/894-a_new_perspective

“Treatment for chronic depression and anxiety -- often the precursors to suicide -- has never been more available and more widespread. Yet the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention this week reported a steady, stubborn rise in the national suicide rate, up 25 percent since 1999. The rates have been climbing each year across most

age and ethnic groups. Suicide is now the 10th leading cause of death in the United States. Nearly 45,000 Americans killed themselves in 2016, twice the number who died by homicide. After decades of research, effective prevention strategies are lacking.” The reasons are complicated, including access to guns, a mental health system that’s patchy, and perhaps a decreasing stigma about suicide. “Some experts fear that suicide is simply becoming more acceptable. “It’s a hard idea to test, but it’s possible that a cultural script may be developing among some segments of our

population,” said Julie Phillips, a sociologist at Rutgers. “Prohibitions are apparently loosening in some quarters,” she said.



From: Desperate Preacher’s post on this gospel: ‘With regard to the mustard seed, Crossan makes a good point about its the interpretation: [The point] “is not just that the mustard plant starts as a proverbially small seed and grows into a shrub of three or four feet, or even higher, it is that it tends to take over where it is not wanted, that it tends to get out of control, and that it tends to attract birds within cultivated areas where

they are not particularly desired. And that, said Jesus, was what the Kingdom was like: not like the mighty cedar of Lebanon and not quite like a common weed, like a pungent shrub with dangerous takeover properties. Something you would want in only small and carefully controlled doses. If you could control it.” [1]

[1] The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant, 1991

Rev. Frank Schafer wrote: “As most of you know, I am originally from Germany. I came over with my wife about 25 years ago.

And we travel back every other year and we always bring goodies back from Germany when we visit.

“So, a few years back, I decided to bring German coffee to our weekly bible study at church. I grabbed this beautifully decorated tin from Eduscho Kaffee and told everybody about the good tasting German coffee. I passed around the tin and shared some facts about German coffee roasting. We tasted the coffee and all agreed ‘this German coffee was as good as advertised.’

“Only that it wasn’t really German coffee; my wife filled me in after I came

home. Unbeknownst to me, the German coffee was already all gone and my wife had filled the Eduscho tin with Folgers.

“But because I believed that this was German coffee, I could taste it, and the people could taste it. Every single one of them could taste the German coffee; nobody thought it was Folgers. They all thought it was genuine German coffee and it tasted really special.

“Sometimes believing is tasting, sometimes believing is seeing.

“And I think that’s what Jesus wants us to understand. He is calling us to be

visionaries; He wants us to believe. Even if our faith is tiny, he wants us to invest this tiny faith we have and start seeing things through God's eyes.”

Rev. Randy Quinn writes: “Clearly, this parable is not about farming or gardening. It's about the seed, the seed that miraculously grows, the seed that becomes something very different than when it was planted. Jesus is saying that the Kingdom of God is like a seed.”

Rev. Rick Thompson wrote: “On this Father’s Day, I think of the way my Dad has planted seed. He hasn’t done anything flashy or spectacular with his life. He’s never been noticed by the media, and there will not be a best-selling biography of his life written someday. But his love has been a steady and reliable presence in our family’s life. He is not highly-educated, but his common sense and problem-solving skills have saved the day numerous times. He has never done anything with a flourish, but in one small act of kindness and compassion after another--forgiving an error

of my youth, sacrificing time and money for his family's sake and the education of his children, offering a word of praise and encouragement, Dad has guided and taught me. His faith is not of the loud and splashy variety, but he has lived with his Lord and his church steadily, quietly, and consistently. That's my Dad. He has planted in his own quiet way the small seeds of faith and love, and I'm certain he has wondered if they would ever bear fruit, and now, we trust, there is a harvest of some sort."

Amen.

Description:

God doesn't make big things happen all the time but sometimes only does very small things that become major. Sometimes if we can just cooperate with God's will and God's way we will see mighty miracles.

Tags:

Seed, miracle, poor, alcohol, cigarette,
German, coffee, taste, wife father, mother,
mustard, encouragement, church, treatment,
chronic, depression, anxiety, precursors,
suicide, kingdom, believing, tasting,
homicide, statistics, Nobel Peace Prize,
Mother Teresa, Calcutta, pennies, Rutgers,
Mediterranean, Jewish, Peasant, Centers for
Disease Control and Prevention, Mark,
Gospel, Jesus, Christ, God, parables, day

St. Stephen's Episcopal ProCathedral

35 South Franklin Street

Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania 18701

The Third Sunday after Pentecost:

Proper 6 (B)

June 14, 2015

“From Small Things Comes Greatness”

A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish

The Gospel according to Mark 4:26-34

Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

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May we see in your kingdom, Lord, the miraculous growth that gives us such hope.
Amen.

One time a mother walked in on her 6 year old son who was sobbing. “What’s the matter?” she asked. The young boy replied, “I’ve just figured out how to tie my shoes.” “Well, honey,” his mother offered, “that’s wonderful. You’re growing up. But why are you crying?” “Because,” he said, “now I’ll have to do it every day for the rest of my life.”

I’ll let you in on a little secret, I have found shoes that do not need tying—the secret on the front of the shoes is called “Velcro”, and before I discovered Velcro to tie my shoes, I used sneakers, but I

understand the previous Bishop would not approve of sneakers. Can you imagine his opinion of Velcro?! Guess the Holy Spirit has perfect timing!

My seventh and eighth grade elementary school classes raised money for the school by selling flower seeds. I got to be pretty good at selling flower seeds door to door, maybe even the best in my class. I didn't sell seeds, however, I sold the pictures of the flowers the seeds would produce; each seed packet had a beautiful picture of what those seeds would produce. But apparently the seeds worked since I had a number of repeat

customers from year to year. I wonder what would happen if we developed a little three color brochure about St. Stephen's and walked door to door in our neighborhoods to tell folks about our church? Maybe we could sell flower seeds at the same time... Is that a Sunday School project, or an adult project?

Years ago we began a feeding project at our church in Elizabeth, New Jersey, that had a "required" Sunday Bible study preceding the meal since many of the folks were unchurched and deep into various addictions. We had eight people the first

Sunday. Now the group, I am told feeds upwards of 70 to 100 each Sunday, following Vespers. One volunteer at that soup kitchen I met at a wedding I did yesterday said she said she had always been raised as a middle-class person and was just very surprised to see that so many people do not have enough to eat. Even our food pantry here cannot help a homeless person very much—thank God that another church offers a hot meal each day. Maybe they could use a bit of help. Or maybe they could use another place to feed the ever-growing numbers of hungry men, women,

and children right in our midst. One of every four children in the US now grow up in poverty with not enough food to eat. And we are the richest nation on earth.

A number of years ago some immigrants from Somalia convinced the city council of Seattle, Washington, to give them some unused urban land right in the middle of Seattle—land similar to that which abuts Pennsylvania Street in Wilkes-Barre with all those abandoned factories. Today the clever Somalian urban farmers feed large groups of people in Seattle with their urban crops. I have seen one urban garden about five

blocks down the street from St. Stephen's Church here, at the corner of West Ross and South River Streets, where people are growing vegetables and herbs in the small community garden. I wonder why no one else is trying to do that?

In 2012 I went back to the house I grew up in and found the huge garden from which I used to pick pole beans and corn and okra and squash and strawberries was not nearly as large as I remembered from my elementary school days—in fact, it was quite small! I was amazed that we could feed our family fresh vegetables from what

we grew in that garden, and we were not a “needy”. Maybe you have a garden. Maybe you could teach others how to grow things on their property or somewhere else nearby.

Seeds are tiny, but they can feed dozens, hundreds, even cities and towns. Do you have “left overs” from your garden? Do you have a spare plot where you could do a little farming and feed some of the hungry here in Wilkes-Barre or in the town in which you live? That could be a healthy hobby. I don’t think it’s that difficult to grow a few veggies.

Yesterday I did a wedding for a friend who got married after he 're-met' his pen pal 45 years later after they first met when they were 10 and 11 years old. He had been sending me a variety of cell phone texts since Thanksgiving of 2012, and our friendship continued which began when he and the members of his Carpenters Union did a major renovation of our church as a donation so we could get a Certificate of Occupancy for our 300 year old church, a C of O for the first time in its history; the church building is even larger than St. Stephen's, but fifty years older. I followed

the history of these seemingly benign and brief cell phone texts on my phone from their beginning and saw how my friend's life changed every so gradually and consistently but rather profoundly over these past three of four years—he went from being a Master Carpenter to being a rescue squad EMS captain who now saves the lives of cancer patients undergoing lifesaving transports and the lives of accident victims his EMS ambulance picks up at automobile accident scenes. Someone commented that even the doctors stand back when the EMS workers get on the scene, as EMS workers

and EMS nurses are specifically and thoroughly trained to keep everyone they can alive during their transport to the closest hospitals.

My EMS friend said he had never worn a watch since his younger days when he did a wilderness survivor program, but now he diligently watches the tiny little second hand on his new watch as he monitors a person's heart rate with his stethoscope in order to keep his patients alive by administering the appropriate medications and procedures as they travel to the hospital. He also noted to me that the sirens of EMS ambulances do

not help but tend to impede the survival of their transportees, so please remember to give ambulances the right of way when you see them in a rush so they do not have to use their siren any more than necessary. His watch's tiny second hand is an absolute key part of life saving.

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Lutheran Pastor James Kegel writes, "God's Kingdom grows in mysterious, miraculous ways. Ancient people knew nothing about the power which transformed a seed into a plant, a shoot into one with a full-ear of grain. They had no time-lapse

photography, but they did have an awe in the face of the natural world. The farmer would sow the grain and then wait. The rains would come and the farmer would get up night and day and watch the growth and then when the harvest came the farmer would reap what had been sown but would also give thanks to God who gave the growth. And it was this image which Jesus used to speak about the growth of his people, the Church.

‘God Kingdom comes as a tiny seed, as small as the mustard seed, but when planted and tended will grow into the greatest of

plants and produce grain fit to be harvested. Similarly God's Word planted and tended will grow into saving faith. People will come to know and love the Lord not so much by techniques and programs, not by gimmicks, but by authentic witness and sharing and caring in a relationship.

‘Caring is an interesting concept and word. It comes from “kara”, the Greek word meaning to “cry out”. To care means to “cry out” with those who are ill, confused, lonely, isolated, forgotten; crying out with the Millennials who are suspicious of organized religion, and caring for

Generation Xers who fear commitment, and for Baby-Boomers in mid-life crisis, and who have impending retirement, and caring for older people who feel redundant and left behind.’

Henri Nouwen, the late theologian said that we care, we care, (quote) “to enter the world of those who are broken and powerless and to establish there a fellowship of the weak; to care is to embrace affectionately those who are touched by hostile hands, to listen attentively to those whose words are otherwise only heard by greedy ears, and to speak gently with those

who are accustomed to harsh orders and impatient requests; caring is to be present to those who suffer and to stay present even when nothing can be done to change their situation.” (unquote)

In a report this week from the Roman Catholic News Agency, “A leading Iraqi prelate has called on world governments to increase their efforts to defeat ISIS and restore land and property to some 120,000 exiled Iraqi Christians.

<http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/mosul-archbishops-plea-to-the-west-save-us-from-isis-64585/>

Marking the first anniversary of ISIS's capture of Mosul, Iraq, Catholic Archbishop Yohanna Mouche called on (quote) "people who have the responsibility" to come to the rescue of the ousted Christian communities, whose people, he added, long to go home. In an interview with international Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need, the archbishop said, "We ask everyone to put pressure on the people who have the responsibility to free the [towns and villages] as soon as possible so the people can come back and live in peace in their

homes and continue their lives there,” he said. Archbishop Mouche also said that if the West is unable to redouble its efforts in the fight against ISIS, it should open its doors to Christians and other minorities seeking asylum. He said, “I am calling on the international community: if they cannot protect us, then they must open their doors and help us start a new life elsewhere,” he said, adding, however, that “we would prefer to remain in Iraq and be protected here.”

Maybe we have a part in the care for those many thousands of miles from us,

those who recently inhabited the plain of Nineveh, Syria, the land of the Old Testament prophet Jonah, and Abraham's land of Ur, and Paul's encounter of Christ in Damascus. What can we do? Prayer--pray for Archbishop Mouche, and for my friend Nabil from General Seminary in New York who is one of the Orthodox Archbishops of northern Syria, two of whose Bishops have been kidnapped and never seen again. Send funds to Episcopal Relief and Development for help for Syrian and Iraqi refugees. Urge our legislators not to forget the needs of

those suffering so direly in Syria, and in Iraq.

Maybe all we can do will be only a mustard seed of effort. But with God's help, the seed can grow and bring peace and life back to a people beleaguered, both there, and here in our own midst.

Thanks be to God. Amen.