

Sermon of July 24, 2011
6th Sunday after Pentecost
The Liturgies of Everyday
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Correction made on July 27, 2011

On Sunday morning I indicated that there were no Dayton houses listed in the Underground Railroad. That was an error. The Daniel Miller House on Danridge Road was part of the Underground Railroad. The list I used for my research was incomplete and I am glad to know that Dayton participated in this vital effort to free slaves. Thanks to Rose Peacock for helping me with this discovery.

Why did Jesus tell parables? Engineers would have preferred a how-to manual. Lawyers – a book of case law. Professors – a dissertation. Others an easy-to-read, step-by-step plan with complete instructions. But instead, we get parables and believe me the parables of Jesus are no cup of tea.

What does Jesus say? Jesus says that he tells parables to reveal what was hidden from the foundation of the world. Jesus is the parable of the Father making known what was present in the beginning. One can't understand parables without transformation and this transformation involves having eyes and ears that are capable of seeing and hearing in the new world that has now come in Jesus. Only then do we understand that this man, Jesus, is God incarnate.[\[i\]\[i\]](#)

The parables of Jesus are the story of his cross in word pictures. While the church is by no stretch of the imagination cross-centered, it is still cross-haunted. It is my hope that the upcoming sermons that I offer might make partially clear what it means for us to be a church shaped by the cross of Christ. And whatever such a church looks like will be shaped by the parables.

The parables are the secret door through which we pass in order to attend the Matthew School for Disciples. They appear as everyday stories but they are packed with eternity. They look easy and yet unsettle our judgment and call into question practically everything we thought we knew.

Two phrases have captured my attention in recent reading: The “radical ordinary” and “the liturgies of everyday life”.[\[ii\]\[ii\]](#) I realize that you don't wake up every morning thinking about how to solve world hunger, eliminate poverty, or put an end to war. You have more immediate concerns. You have deadlines at work, relationship issues, difficulty with children. You don't sleep so well. You worry about getting old. You worry about Social Security and Medicare. The daily chores and cares of life are mixed with our existence in the kingdom of God. A kingdom of God in the midst of the ordinary.

A mustard seed is ordinary. Truth be told, there's no line forming to be **the mustard seed**. In our winner take all world, everyone wants to be the tree and some, in arrogance, want to be in charge of who gets to live in the tree. The mustard seed is buried in the ground. As a student of the New Testament, I couldn't help but overhear echoes of truth: "Do you not know that we have been buried with Christ by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."[\[iii\]\[iii\]](#) Being the seed planted underground is invisible, dirty work, with no recognition.

Here in Ohio we recall the work of the Underground Railroad – the risks taken by those determined to free slaves from their bondage.[\[iv\]\[iv\]](#) Thirteen stops in Ohio. The Village of Mt. Pleasant, Ohio, established a Free Labor Store in 1848 that refused to sell goods produced by slave labor. Their efforts didn't end slavery, but the seed they planted issued in the Emancipation Proclamation and finally in the Civil Rights Bill. Kingdom work, especially its social justice component, requires a people who refuse to be hurried, who possess a radical patience. God is never in a hurry. "**The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, longsuffering, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness to the thousandth generation.**"[\[v\]\[v\]](#) A mustard seed. Leavened bread. A burned out Jesse stump.[\[vi\]\[vi\]](#) Four hundred years of slavery before redemption. Exile and finally Jesus, born of a virgin, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. On the third day he was raised from the dead. Patience even with death. "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."[\[vii\]\[vii\]](#)

Our impatience needs to be fashioned into what Adrienne Rich calls a "**wild patience,**" what Michel Foucault calls a "**patient labor giving form to our impatience for liberty.**" The change that we most need will come largely from **those who have time to take time to listen to one another and to remember the dead.** We have all the time in the world.

The liturgies of everyday life say almost everything about the kind of people we are. If we are going to be the incarnation of the parables of Jesus, then we are going to produce a set of counter-practices bearing witness to the presence of God. We will not be pushy or arrogant. Not insistent on our way. Not authoritarian. Not envious. Not irritable or resentful. Instead we will rejoice in the truth, in well-doing, bearing all things, believing all things, hoping all things, enduring all things.

Here's how it looks: sitting around a table together, sharing a cup of coffee or a mug of beer, talking, questioning, learning – not going in any particular direction or trying to solve any world problems – just getting to know one another in the kind of settings that actually create social power. Perhaps our social justice work has been too impatient as we organize around meetings and money but rarely getting to know one another across the table in our homes.

Liberty Mutual Insurance has an ad showing people doing ordinary acts of kindness. "When people do the right thing, we call it being responsible." Hold the

elevator for someone. Let someone into busy traffic at the airport. Help someone up who has fallen on a slippery sidewalk. As each person acts in this way, another person sees the action, and then repeats it in a different context. The liturgies of everyday life.

The mustard seed, Jesus says, grows into a giant tree. Imagine the church as a refuge for those tossed here and there by what the world calls fate. A giant tree providing a home for all the birds of the air. There are more than 10,000 species of birds on earth. That's more birds than there are Baptist denominations but some days it seems not by much. Such an amazing diversity and yet humans are so conflicted about diversity. There's a mistrust among blacks and whites in this city that hangs over us like the morning haze that poisons our air quality. It's thicker than the smoke rising from Dayton-area bars that refuse to enforce the Ohio smoking ban.

And so the kingdom is also like a field with buried treasure and a pearl of great value. In order to enter the field that is God's kingdom, we must sell off everything we have. We have to search until we find the pearl that is God's kingdom and then sell off everything to possess it. Matthew calls us to the dispossession of any sense of ownership, any sense that we are in charge, any sense that this all belongs to us. Jesus has all of his followers sign a non-compete agreement. **"Not competitors for space in this world"** is a difficult aspiration for us. We are not climbing a ladder or trying to get one up on someone else. Like "Christ" [we] will always be in exile, a refugee, in a world constrained by endless struggles for advantage, where success lies always in establishing your position at the expense of another's."

Will Campbell tells the story of an Episcopal priest in Mississippi named Duncan Gray. As Will puts it, he was just a "good man." What is the mark of a good man? "a man of unceasing joy." Joy in the biblical and Prayer Book understanding. Not joy as happy-go-lucky for he is capable of deep sadness. Over the years, through the trials and tribulations, good times and bad, victories and defeats: joyous. Springs from assuredness that God has intervened in human history. Advent. Easter. Pentecost. Joy not dependent on highs and lows of feeling or changing conditions of affluence or misfortune. A person close to Gray had said, 'Duncan is what the Episcopal Church would be if everyone in it believed (lived by) the words they repeat every Sunday.' The radicalism of the liturgy had made an ordinary man good. Joyous. And a truly joyous person is never up to anything [to take advantage, to lord it over]."

Then Jesus interrupts the sermon of parables to ask, "Have you understood all this?" The disciples, like us lovers of simple, quick, final answers, answered, "Yes." The answer is too quick, too superficial, and too fast. They don't understand. They lack the training to understand. Let us not be so confident that we have it all figured out. Any "yes" we give to Jesus is more of a promise than a result. In training yet, we keep learning both from the old and from the new. The old is not the old time gospel or the early years of the 20th century, not even the New Testament

Church. The truly old is older than dirt. The truly old squeezed the dirt, the pre-existent matter – what had been hidden from the foundation of the world – Jesus Christ, son of God, second person of the Trinity.

As Will Campbell reminds us, “We just can’t quite trust the power of the Gospel message. [Jesus says we only need faith the size of a mustard seed,^[viii]^[viii] but we are resistant, skeptical. What is the last thing we did around here that entailed risk, that looked impossible, that totally depended on the Holy Spirit if there was a ghost of a chance? Aren’t we tied in to management strategies, to corporate thinking, to bottom line decisions, to “we can’t afford it” mentalities?] So we keep thinking there just must be something we can add, some gimmick, some technique, some strategy. Just this once I wanted to rely only upon this [the gospel] and if it wasn’t enough then let it not be enough. I am more and more convinced that it is all we have to offer as the church.”

Only radicals working out of a radical church can charge the everyday liturgies with eternal life. This will mean seeing the church for what it really is instead of what we have allowed it to become – an extension of our pitiful politics, a nice group of people getting tax deductions for charitable contributions, or being an extension of the nation. These are destructive habits and we must break them. “For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.”^[ix]^[ix] I don’t know what else to say. We’re it. This is what it’s all about – flesh and blood, real, everyday life and the kingdom of God. It is neither a beholding to the politics of death, nor a sucking up to the arrogant politics of America. It turns out that a mustard seed, a loaf of bread, a field with buried treasure, a fine pearl, a net full of fish, and a householder with treasure new and old are all part of the new creation, and within all that is ordinary and everyday there is the life that never ends and the power that conquers death and you can’t get more radical than that.

^[i]^[i] “The parables are meant to reveal the kind of transformation necessary for those who would follow Jesus to participate in the kingdom of heaven.”

^[ii]^[ii] Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations between a Radical Democrat and a Christian*.

^[iii]^[iii] Romans 6:1-4

^[iv]^[iv] The Underground Railroad stops in Ohio didn’t include Dayton.

1. [Harriet Beecher Stowe House](#)--Cincinnati
2. [John P. Parker House](#)--Ripley
3. [John Rankin House](#)--Ripley
4. [Village of Mt. Pleasant Historic District](#)--Mt. Pleasant
5. [Wilson Bruce Evans House](#)--Oberlin

6. [Rush R. Sloane House](#)--Sandusky
7. [Daniel Howell Hise House](#)--Salem
8. [Col. William Hubbard House](#)--Ashtabula
9. [Reuben Benedict House](#)--Marengo
10. [Samuel and Sally Wilson House](#)--Cincinnati
11. [James and Sophia Clemens Farmstead](#)--Greenville
12. [Spring Hill](#)--Massillon
13. [Putnam Historic District](#)--Zanesville

[\[V\]](#)[v] Exodus 34:6-7a

[\[Vi\]](#)[vi] "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots" (Isaiah 11:1-9).

[\[Vii\]](#)[vii] I Corinthians 11:26

[\[Viii\]](#)[viii] Matthew 17:20; Luke 17:6

[\[ix\]](#)[ix] II Corinthians 4:12