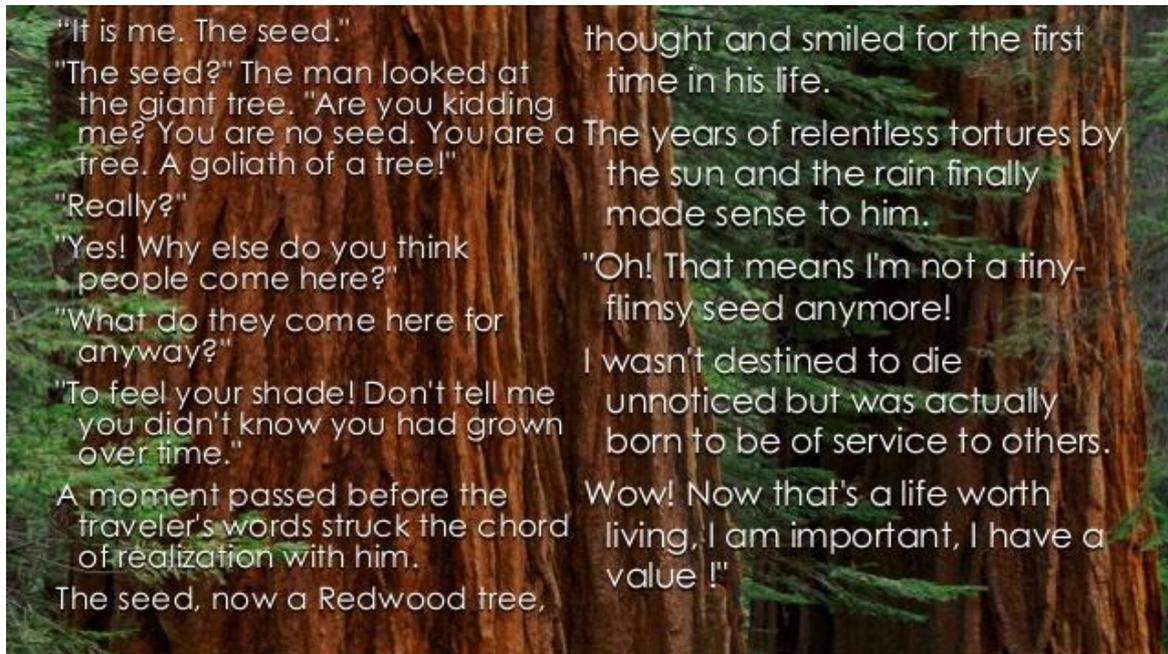


11th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B

June 13, 2021



For centuries, people in some of India's mountainous regions, have constructed 'living bridges' from the aerial roots of rubber trees which are trained to grow across ravines and rivers. A tangle of roots is developed that are strong enough to support a person and resilient in floods. As the bridges only grow as fast as the tree, to building such a living bridge takes more than a lifetime. This task is passed down from generation to generation with children completing the parents' work.

Like this story of living bridges, the readings help us reflect on our call to engage in work that may not be completed in our lifetime. So too, building a more just, loving, Christ-like world is long-term. In Ezekiel, the image of the mighty tree and sapling refer to the injustice of the day as well as the great distance between the 'high' and the 'lowly' and how the high will be brought low and lowly lifted up in the future. It could appear that Ezekiel and Jesus have low expectations. Few people listened to the prophets and even fewer changed their lives. But clearly God is content to work with a few courageous people. In Ezekiel, God says, '*I (Yahweh) will take from the crest of the cedar, from its topmost branches tear off a tender shoot, and plant it on a high and lofty mountain; on the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it.*' This small shoot (small group of people) will grow into something the old tree could never produce. Hope for meaningful change demands the destruction

of old institutions and starting from scratch. But to achieve that we need to be willing to start small. Covid-19 pandemic, sexual abuse in the church and other scandals show up how the institution needs to rebuild itself!

Mark's community was being persecuted. It believed that the just would flourish like the palm trees, yet they were being martyred in Rome and rejected in Jerusalem. Such ugly and incomprehensible realities caused serious misgivings. Were they just misguided as others claimed? Were they taken in by a fanatical sect? Mark was responding to a frightened and disillusioned community that was physically threatened and plagued by the doubts arising from unmet expectations.

Like Mark's community, we need to remember that God's ways are different to ours, and we are called to trust God. Mark tells this parable to help his community stand strong in the midst of chaos and believe that something was germinating out of sight yet very near to them. Paul tells the Corinthians, 'We walk by faith, not by sight.' Might this not be need today, not for the community that is persecuted but disillusioned by its leadership, often not listened to and ignored and many leaving the community? Mark could also be telling us to trust that there is another dynamic at work even in moments when we feel powerless to do anything more except to 'hold our ground' and plant whatever seed we have and go on. Stephen Mattson, in ***The Great Reckoning: Surviving a Christianity That Looks Nothing Like Christ*** reminds us that wherever Christianity becomes socially acceptable, it can lose the ability to bring about the changes Jesus intended his followers to implant in the world around them. And those who commit to carrying on Jesus' ministry can be regarded as 'radicals' even by fellow Christians.

True growth is often imperceptible. It is not about a quick fix or numbers. When practicing as a psychologist, I found that change was often imperceptible and slow. But the incremental changes in people was worth waiting for as people accepted themselves, valued their strengths, humbly accept their weaknesses, with dignity and beauty. It often led to greater service and care for others. And God works through unexpected means for unexpected results. Building God's reign, doing life differently with others in solidarity, comes through the hearts and actions of ordinary people, that

(outwardly at least) appear might inconsistent but with the surprising outcome. This is the new creation Paul refers to whose goal is the reconciliation of all humanity to God. In the quest for justice, peace and love in our world, results can often be difficult to see, and our efforts can often feel like futile attempts to push back the tide. In the canonisation of Oscar Romero in 2018, two trajectories merged in the church. Romero could not be merely recognised for his holy life without his ministry for the poor and challenging human rights abuses. We see that we as Christians, the Church, cannot avert their eyes or be silent before the struggle for justice. Again it involves a choice-not where we stand on issues but where we sit and who we sit with.

The struggle for justice, as unpalatable it may be for many, cannot allow us to sit on the fence or blame the victims of unjust systems and institutions as was done after the Tulsa Massacre in 1921 or Palestinians in their struggle for justice and dignity under Israeli occupation. Pope Francis reminds us that we must be both poor and for the poor. He declared, *'What we are witnessing today is the biggest gap between rich and poor that humanity has ever witnessed.'* The poor, the persecuted, the oppressed and persecuted are besieging the gates of the rich, demanding to be admitted. We can appear to be drowning in bad news with news of hatred, wars and threats of wars, ignoring the story of asylum seekers and turning our backs on them who are at risk of drowning, accepting the illegal detention of asylum seekers and refugees, the violence against people and God's creation, the corruption in financial institutions and corporations, and the open wound in the churches due to the physical, sexual and psychological abuse of children. It is God's word to us - today. They are the voice of God to us.

We can be left stunned and powerless when faced with so much suffering. We might question what we can do to improve this world particularly when political and religious leaders who are expected to bring about the changes needed to move toward a more dignified, human and happy existence fail. But it is only in the involvement and engagement that we realise that there are so many other people (people of faith and no faith) also sowing seeds for a new humanity.

We are called to sow small seeds of a new humanity. Jesus does not speak of big things. God's reign is, as we see in today's parable of the mustard seed, something very humble and modest in its origins. It can go as unnoticed as the smallest seed, but has the potential to grow and bear fruit in an unexpected manner.

Let us appreciate little things and small gestures. We are called to put a little dignity, a little compassion, a little more justice, into each corner of our little world. It might not feel heroic but that friendly gesture towards a person in trouble, that welcoming smile for someone who is alone, that invitation to a neighbour or stranger to share a meal, that listening ear for someone who is in despair or fighting of the demons of mental illness might not seem to be big things - but they are. They are little seeds that build up God's reign, seeds of a new humanity. One of my favourite quotes is from Micah 6:8: *(God) has told you, what is good; and what God requires of you: act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with your God.* A Talmudic commentary on this verse says: Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Walk humbly now. Do justly now. Love mercy now. You are not expected to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it. When we despair at the slow pace of our work as disciples, we must keep each other going with stories of the world we are building: a world of humility, justice and mercy; a world where each of us, no matter how lowly, can take root on the mountaintop; a world of easy, joyful abundance for all.

It is painful to look around at the scale of need in our world knowing that most of us can fill only a tiny part of that need. But since we know that each person has untold worth in the eyes of God, we trust that whatever we do to help even one person does have value and does help to build the reign of God. We do not have the luxury of giving up. So, let's keep building. All of our efforts mean something. Ultimately, God is the one who will grow life, ever so patiently, from tiny seeds and little branches. So, plant the seed.