

## **The possibilities are infinite**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts on the Second Sunday after Pentecost, June 14, 2009.

*A mustard seed,...when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grown up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches.*

Mark 4:31,32

It was with great conviction that just twelve disciples spread abroad Christianity to what is now one fourth of the world's population. It didn't happen overnight. The ongoing mission of the church continues to be a work in progress over the last two thousand years. It took the first three hundred years for Christianity to be accepted in the Roman Empire to the point when Christians no longer had to fear for their lives. It took several hundred years more for missionaries to reach northern Europe and it was only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that Christianity was brought to the Far East and Africa. So, when we think of the growth and influence of the Christian faith on a world-wide scale, we have to remember that the church as we know it today came about through a process of small beginnings. The blood of the martyrs sowed the seeds of Christian witness in the world.

Jesus' teaching story about faith as small as a mustard seed tells us that all great movements had small beginnings. There is great power and strength in beginning small because the possibilities for growth are infinitesimal. Just as the seeds and small plants in a garden have to be cultivated and nourished or they will die, in the same way we have to be nurtured in the teaching of the gospel. In the end, much of the work is God's work in God's time. The harvest we reap belongs to God who provides the nourishment and growth. We set the conditions while God is the source of growth. That is what is so important about these children being baptized today and what is so important about our Church School and youth group whose teachers and leaders we honor today.

Last year, I stood on the beaches of Normandy, France and thought about the thousands of brave men in that first wave of the invasion on D day in June 1944. Their only contribution was to give their lives taking out the German defense line so that others might advance beyond them. It was a chilling experience to go up inside the German bunkers and look down from vantage point where so many of our brave men were fired upon and died on those beaches. With their initial sacrifice, it was a slow step by step process of allied armies gaining new ground acre by acre, mile by mile until the whole continent of Europe was liberated.

I recently visited Warm Springs, Georgia where President Franklin Roosevelt went for therapy in the warm mineral waters. Many Americans did not know that he was a paraplegic. It was there that he formed his vision for a place where polio patients could come for treatment of their paralyzed limbs. His vision became a reality when he invested two thirds of his personal fortune to develop the rehabilitation center. The polio patients were inspired that one of their fellow patients could become President of the United States. From this one man's vision a center was developed to help generations of patients to learn to live with their disability. With the polio vaccine having been so effective in eradicating the disease, Warm Springs is now being proposed as a rehabilitation center for injured and disabled veterans of the Iraq war.

Our culture does not value smallness. We work to build up a business, earn an impressive salaries, live in large homes, drive big cars, own powerful boats, acquire vacation

homes, send our kids to the best schools and belong to the biggest churches. The kingdom is only realized when each of us begins deep down inside to allow God's kingdom to be realized within, beginning with the right set of values.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks of the birds of the air and the lilies of the field and how they are provided with everything they need, he is honoring the spiritual in the material, the intangible in the tangible. This makes the concept of the kingdom of God less a doctrine to be taught and more a possibility to be lived.

The kingdom is realized when we take a stand for peace and justice. It becomes a reality when volunteers teach inner city youth who would otherwise never catch up with the rest of society. It is seen in those who work to prevent innocent lives from being lost in the crossfire of the powerful gun lobby. We see it in American veterans and former enemies walking arm in arm both vowing "never again."

In the classic novel, *The Brothers Karamozov*, Dostoevsky writes: "Love all creation, the whole and every grain of sand of it. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants and love everything. ...when you perceive the divine mystery in all things, you begin to comprehend it better every day."

One of the major factors that keep us from maturing spiritually is a narcissistic obsession with past hurts and traumas. Until we let go of old hurts and offenses, we cannot be at peace with ourselves. Inner healing begins in a corner of our lives in which we gain power over the pain of past hurts and let the healing take place from the inside out.

Thomas Moore in his book, *The Care of the Soul*, seeks to cultivate the depth and sacredness of life by explaining the difference between care and cure. Too often, we seek to relieve pain by trying to cure hurts from the past that cannot be cured. While the care of the soul appreciates what is gained through human suffering, it does not offer the illusion of a problem free life. We have to learn to care for ourselves and heal the hurts enough to live beyond them. Dwelling on old hurts and abuses results in a dysfunctional narcissism. If we are to get on with our lives, we have to get beyond ourselves.

What we learn from this parable of the mustard seed is that greatness comes from small things and that connectedness is what makes it all happen. The network of mutually responsible Christians working for the sacredness of life makes real the realm of God's love and concern that we call the kingdom. When we begin with faith as small as a mustard seed and remain connected with all creation, we know that while we may experience finite disappointment, we never lose infinite hope.