

Church of the Crossroads  
Second Sunday after Pentecost  
June 18, 2006  
Neal MacPherson

## REVOLUTIONARY PATIENCE

Ezekiel 17:22-25  
Mark 4:26-34

Let us hear those two little parables once again:

. . . “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.”

. . . “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall 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.”

- Mark 4:26-32

There is something about these parables that goes against the cultural grain. Those who live in the North American cultural context have a difficult time understanding them. For our culture is a “do it yourself culture.” If you want to get ahead, you have to work for it. If you want to win a war on terrorism, you must become interventionist. Idle hands are the devil’s workshop. The early bird gets the worm. We could go on and on, but you surely get the point. There is something about our culture that is incompatible with passivity of any kind, or even patience.

Yet, here in the Gospel of Mark, we have these little parables suggesting that all we human beings are called to do is to sew the seed, and then be patient, allowing God to do God's work. We sew the seed, and then just sleep and rise night and day, until the full grain appears. No cultivation of the ground is called for in the parable. There is no fertilizer to be applied; no pesticides to be administered. There is to be no human intervention. All that we are called to do is to plant the seed, and lo and behold, in due time, the harvest is ready. In due time, the ripened grain appears. In due time, that little mustard seed, the tiniest of all seeds, becomes a huge, immense shrub, so large that birds can nest in its shade.

The kingdom of God is like that. It can begin as simply with the sewing of a seed. From that small beginning, the Kingdom may one day flourish.

I am wondering whether or not we ever will be able to learn from these parables, so enamored are we with activism, American style. Culturally bound, we begin to speak and act as though the Kingdom of God were up to us. No wonder we are so restless and anxious, most of the time. We simply do not trust the Spirit to do her work any further than we can look.

Allow me to illustrate. Judy Rantala, Renate Rose, and I just returned from the Aha Pae'aina yesterday. As far as Aha Pae'aina's go, this was a good one. There was an absence of "back stage hostility," so obvious in Aha Pae'aina's of the past. Everyone demonstrated a spirit of trust.

And yet, at one point, that old American cultural virtue of being in control dominated the deliberations. In a discussion of the by-laws, it was recognized that on the conference level, at least on paper, there are now four mission teams: Administration, Formation, Stewardship, and Justice/Witness. Your pastor, by the way, was elected to be the chair of the Justice/Witness team. This, however, was not enough for some of the delegates. They wanted to have everything spelled out. They wanted to have a precise definition of each mission team. They wanted to know what each team was planning to do. Judy Rantala and I, having in mind our experience with our mission teams here at Crossroads, urged the delegates to relax just a little, to simply enter the process of developing each mission team, and then to allow the Holy Spirit to do her work.

All we are called to do is to plant the seed, as hard as that is to accept. At another point, in the Aha Pae‘aina, however, we witnessed the truth of the little parables under consideration. This time, it was not a discussion of the by-laws, but rather a presentation of a workshop that will eventually be presented at the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of what has become known as the Haystack prayer meeting. (As the new chair of the Justice/Witness team, I will be present for this anniversary that has been organized largely through the efforts of a former Crossroader, Carrie Bail. She is the pastor of the First Congregational Church of Williamstown, Massachusetts.) Back to the Haystack prayer meeting. It was on an August afternoon in 1806 that five Williams College students met in a field, as was their habit, to talk and pray and dream of a better world. When a sudden thunderstorm interrupted, they sought shelter under a haystack – and there resolved to offer their lives, in the name of Jesus Christ, to carry their faith into service “into all the world.” From this beginning, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions came into being, and was this American Board that sponsored the first group of missionaries to come to Hawai‘i.

What was remarkable about the workshop that Aletha Kaohi and Stanley Lum presented at the Aha Pae‘aina was its balanced historical interpretation of the legacy of those first missionaries who came to Hawai‘i. In the presentation, the missionaries were honored, certainly. But the terrible consequences of that missionary activity were also clearly articulated. Aletha and Stanley spoke of the way in which the missionaries denigrated and nearly destroyed the indigenous Hawaiian culture. They spoke of the way in which the missionaries brought their notions of private property with them, which in turn led to the Great Mahele and the taking away of vast stretches of land from the Hawaiian people. They spoke of the way in which the children of those early missionaries orchestrated the overthrow of Queen Lili‘uokalani.

I suppose we could liken the Haystack prayer meeting to the planting of a mustard seed, but that is not the mustard seed I have in mind. What came to me as Aletha Kaohi and Stanley Lum were presenting their workshop at the Aha Pae‘aina was the time some twenty years ago when a group of women from Wai‘anae wrote a liturgy for the Women’s Day of Prayer. The liturgy declared that the missionaries had brought both the cross and the American flag with them when they came to Hawai‘i, both the

Gospel and also American cultural values that nearly destroyed the culture of the Hawaiian people. That liturgy, written just twenty years ago, was

received with anger and hostility on the part of many who belonged to our churches. These folk viewed the liturgy as an attack on the missionaries. There was a move to prevent the liturgy from being used on the World Day of Prayer.

The liturgy was used nonetheless, and lo and behold, now twenty years later, the spirit of that liturgy has now been incorporated in a well-received presentation at a meeting of those same church people! Of course, in the meanwhile, we have witnessed a growing sovereignty movement among the *kanaka maoli*. We have also witnessed the United Church of Christ apologizing to the Hawaiian People for its complicity in the overthrow of the Queen and the monarchy. But the seed, planted twenty years ago by those women from Wai‘anae, has become a shrub so large that birds can rest in its shade.

May I suggest that this is God’s doing? Some of us twenty years ago were hoping that we could have a balanced history of the missionary past, but we wondered whether it would ever be. And now, amazingly, such a balanced history is not only being envisioned, it is being presented by Hawaiian Christians themselves! Thanks be to God.

Chad Myers, in his wonderful commentary on Mark’s Gospel, says that these two little parables call for revolutionary patience. God seeks to carry out a revolution in the world, a revolution of justice and peace and compassion. That revolution was part and parcel of the life and ministry of Jesus the Christ. The little parables call us to place our trust and our hope in that revolution. They ask us to trust that God’s realm will be one day fulfilled in the earth. All we need to do is to plant the seeds, and then be patient. In God’s good time, the harvest will come.

One wonders whether or not Jesus had in mind the wonderful image from the prophet Ezekiel when he told his little parables. Or, was it Mark who was familiar with Ezekiel’s image? We do not know. But I would like to close with Ezekiel’s words. They describe, in yet another way, the way in which God’s realm of justice and peace will come into being. These words of Ezekiel, also, call us to revolutionary patience.

Thus says the Sovereign God:  
I myself will take a sprig  
from the lofty top of a cedar;  
I will set it out.  
I will break off a tender one  
from the topmost of its young twigs;  
I myself will plant it  
on a high and lofty mountain.  
On the mountain height of Israel  
I will plant it,  
in order that it may produce boughs and  
bear fruit, and become a noble cedar.  
Under it every kind of bird will live;  
in the shade of its branches will nest  
winged creatures of every kind.  
All the trees of the field shall know  
that I am the Sovereign God.  
I bring low the high tree,  
I make high the low tree,  
I dry up the green tree  
and make the dry tree flourish.  
I the Sovereign God have spoken;  
I will accomplish it.

Thanks be to God. Amen.