

Little Seeds That Grow

Matthew 2:14a and 36-41

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It's something that a lot of us who have Facebook have done even though we might not admit it. Granted, it's not the most polite thing to do, but we do it out of curiosity. What that practice is you may ask? Looking up people we went to high school with to see how they turned out.

While for a long time Facebook users like myself, I am already Facebook friends with most the people I went to high school. But for my dad, a 61-year-old baby boomer who finally got Facebook out of reluctance, looking up the people he went to high school with in 1974 and see how they turned out is something of an activity.

Even though my Dad quickly rejected my suggestion of adding some of his long longest high school classmates on Facebook as "friends," I think he does enjoy seeing how many of his classmates turned out while perhaps maybe secretly also seeing if their looks have held up after all these years.

Out of the few friends, my dad did add as a Facebook friend was a childhood friend he had in the 1960s named Billy. "Billy" as my dad shared with me, was "the runt of the litter." Growing up in a large Irish Catholic family, Billy had four brothers growing up—all who were tall, extroverted, charming, and super athletes. And then there was Billy—the youngest of them all. A short, awkward, and chubby kid who wore coke bottom glasses and was into talking on Ham radios while his brothers were on the football fields.

"I think he was adopted because the guy just didn't fit in," my dad recalled.

Low and beyond to my father's surprise, after he lost contact with Billy after he his friend moved away when they were 13, Billy not only had a growth spurt, but despite his awkwardness, became a successful doctor and as my dad mentioned, "his looks held up better than the rest of us."

Now let's be honest with one another. All of us know a few Billys in our lives growing up. Those kids who didn't seem to fit in and were kind of awkward or always getting in trouble. Perhaps some of us were the "Billys" growing up. For my one friend, a retired elementary school teacher, she said it's a gift for her to see how well her students that were "the Billys" turned out And connect with them on Facebook.

"As a retired teacher, I feel exceptionally happy when I see how these students turned out just fine," she said. "Though, I don't think I will ever go to see one of my students who are now a well-known doctor not particularly because he was deceitful or a bad child. But because I wouldn't be able to get over the fact that my doctor, the very one whom I would be trusting with my life, was once a student of mine that I put in time out for eating Elmer's glue."

Our scripture today is a collection of parables that speak to not only the Billys of our lives but about the need never underestimate what God has for not only the Billys out there but the mustard seeds which seem small and unrealistic they would produce growth.

What I find interesting about these parables is that they have a lot in common with Jesus other parables. They are not about the strongest, the flashiest, or the most well-known individuals who come out on top—but the Billys. Jesus parables are about the poorest, the meekest, the unknown and the unnoticed, ordinary as a mustard bush who against all odds and much surprise achieve the unthinkable.

These mini-stories is Jesus telling us in these four parables makes the kingdom attainable for ordinary people who are doing ordinary things. And I think this is the greatest allure of Jesus ministry and why it was so successful. His parables—his ministry was not about strong Titans or those with great wealth who conquered their enemies and gained entrance into a heaven of so high stature that only the privileged could obtain. Rather his parables consisted of stories of those who were following him, the fishermen, housewives, farmers, the common people. They were people who were are able, much to the surprise of others, obtain the kingdom of God in a way the elite and the powerful could not conceive.

Last month I was on vacation and was in Hampton Roads where I lived for a year while I did a year long hospital chaplain residency after seminary. During my time there, I had the opportunity to catch up with one of the elders of a small Disciples church where I did pulpit supply for a summer.

One of the things about the Hampton Roads is that much like other parts of the south in the Bible Belt, the question people ask does not do you go to church, but where you go to church. And for churches in Hampton Roads, there was steep competition by many to lure people in on Sunday mornings. Most of the churches that feuded in the competition were the mega churches. Because for them, it was all about who had the biggest building, the flashiest church sign, and who offered the biggest screens, fog machines and hip looking pastors who wore blue jeans.

And then there was Park View Christian Church. Located down the street from one of the biggest and flashiest mega churches, Park View had a small and older church building which not only didn't have a flashy sign but was sometimes hard to see because of tall overgrown trees that almost hid it.

At Park View, there was no mosh pit of people raising their hands signing to praise songs. There was only a small congregation that for some reason always sat in the back and often commented on how they couldn't hear me loud enough. There was no team of highly paid preachers or teachers. They just a pastor who was there before me who worked there part time and a janitor and office manager that worked for free. But what I witnessed in my three months at Park View showed me that while they were merely a mustard seed or a "Billy" church among hidden in the overgrown trees, their ministry was communal, intimate, and real in a way other churches may not have been.

From a woman in her 50s who despite raising a grandchild with severe emotional disabilities because her daughter was in jail always had a small on his face. To another man in his late 40s who worked as a postal worker that would greet people every Sunday and make it an effort to remember each visitors name. To William and Fiona, an older couple in their 80s who would collect non-perishable food items and ran a food pantry throughout the week. They never let their age slow them down no matter how much they did for the church.

One such memory I can recall happening at Park View happened on Sunday after worship while all of us were hurrying to get out to enjoy the 4th of July weekend with many

headed to family picnics up in Virginia Beach. As we were locking up the church and headed to the parking lot, a worn mini-van came into the church parking lot and a couple in their 30s with a handful of children spilled out of it. The father of the children expressed to Tina and Arnie that he had lost his job as a janitor outside of Richmond about 100 miles away and that he was trying to get to North Carolina so they could stay with relatives. Looking distraught and tired, he told them his van was just about out of gas and his children hadn't eaten since the day before and he needed assistance.

While I had expected the elders to give them some snacks and maybe some gas money before they hurried back out to the parking lot, I was surprised by what they did. Without looking frustrated that their Sunday plans were going to be delayed, they and a handful of others went into the kitchen and began to start cooking. One member cooked spaghetti sauce using his family recipe seasoning. Another prepared the pasta while others sliced vegetables. And while everyone else was cooking, another member and a few of the children set a table out for the family as another elder went with the father to a local gas station to fill up his tank, giving him enough gas to get to North Carolina.

"You are going through a lot of work," I remember mentioning to one of the members knowing that she was hoping to get to the beach after church. As she looked down at me while mixing lemonade, I remember just seeing her smile.

"Our church does what it always has sought to do—to do what Jesus would have done," she said.

As I look back, I am not sure what about Park View's small church building hidden behind large overgrown trees stuck out to this family as they passed by the bigger and flashier mega church down the street. And while I am sure that mega church would have provided that family with some assistance, I am sure no one would have done it like those at Park View.

"God is at work, even though human eyes may fail to perceive what is happening," writes writer Doug Hare.

What is it that mustard seeds grow? What is it that provides these seeds of nutrients so they can find their potential?

For those who are teachers, coaches, and parents, these parables call us not to give up on the children in our lives and continue to provide them with love and support so these young people, who often feel like mustard seeds, can grow into adults and accomplish wonderful things.

For our churches and our faith communities, these parables call us to realize it's not about having a hipster pastor in jeans preaching every morning, having a flashy church sign, or focusing on how many people we can fill in these pews each week. Rather, it's the time and investment we make into providing love and support for those in our faith community while welcoming the outsiders and the travelers that defines a church and carries out the real ministry of Jesus.

"It's about allowing God to take our small seeds, and through love and compassion, we grow it into a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

But also important to remember these parables are also about ourselves.

“The kingdom of God within us is a treasure indeed,” writes John Wesley. But a treasure hid from the world, and from the wisest and prudent in it God that finds this treasure.”

Even though we may not be seeing the fruits of our hard labor from the seeds we've planted, it doesn't mean God doesn't indeed for those seeds to grow. Nor does it mean those seeds are not sprouting life already. Because while we may be looking for high strands of grass, down below unbeknownst to us those seeds, underneath the dirt, are starting to sprout new life.

For those finding themselves going through struggles to overcome addictions, financial or family issues, and feel hidden beneath the dirt, God sees our potential and through our struggles is sprouting new life, new potential, and new possibilities for us. We just need to continue to nurture our hearts, minds, and soul, until it's time for our season.

For those who are going through difficulties trying to discern what's next in their lives after a change in jobs, starting retirement, or finding themselves getting older, just because you realize you don't stand as strong and tall as you once did, it doesn't mean God isn't working beneath the soil and growing new possibilities for you. You just need to continue to nurture our hearts, minds, and soul, until it's time.

I like to believe that God is always using us, especially for us who feel like Billys, to do remarkable things while surprising others how tall we end up growing. And while we may not see it as quickly as others or stand out as strong at first like those around us, we are being nurtured by a meticulous farmer who nurtures us with love, compassion, and patience and even when others may doubt or pass us by, calls us at specific moment to to sprout the longest stems which become the strongest branches that will support the most amount of life.

No matter what season you may be in, never doubt or give up on your their potential. “There is treasure buried in the field of every one of our days, writes Frederick Buechner and it is our business, as we journey, to keep our eyes peeled for it.”

Bibliography

Feasting on the Word: preaching the Revised common lectionary. By David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville (Ky.): Westminster John Knox Press, 2011. N. pag. Print.

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