

**The possibilities are limitless**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 14, 2015.

*The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground and the seed would sprout and grow.... Mark 4:26*

It didn't happen overnight. The growth of Christianity was the result of great efforts over a long period of time. Despite today's decline in numbers and rise in secularism, Christianity still numbers one fourth of the world's population. The ongoing mission of the church will always be a work in progress. For the first two centuries, Christians faced persecution and feared for their lives. From those small beginnings, the growth of the early church came at the cost of those willing to give their lives in witness to Christ. The conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century changed all that when Christianity became not only legal, but also the official state religion. It took several hundred years more for missionaries to reach northern Europe and it was only in the 19th century that Christianity was brought to the Far East and Africa. So, when we envision global Christianity, we need to realize that the church as we know it today grew through a process of telling the story of Jesus Christ, beginning with a few people sharing the story in small communities until the Good News of the gospel went global.

I find it fascinating to visit the places where historical events have taken place. It was an inspiring experience to pray at the traditional site of Jesus' birthplace, to walk the shores of the Sea of Galilee where he called together his disciples and stand where he preached the Sermon on the Mount. I have seen the hill where he was crucified, stood outside the tomb in which he was buried and where he was first seen after the resurrection. I have seen the ruins of the seven churches in Asia and stood in the amphitheatre where Saint Paul preached to the people of Ephesus so many centuries ago. To be in the Coliseum in Rome I could envision Christians fearlessly facing death by ravenous lions.

It was a very moving experience to visit the beaches of Normandy, France where the thousands brave soldiers of the allied armies landed in that first wave of the invasion of Europe on D Day in June 1944. I stood at the water's edge and imagined what it must have been like for the allies to land on the French coast in the face of enemy fire. It was eerie to go up inside the German bunkers and look down from that vantage point where the allied forces were fired upon and gave their lives in that initial effort. So many young men sacrificed their lives taking out the German defenses so that others might advance beyond the shores. It was sobering to see the thousands of graves of both Americans and Germans who fought there. After their initial sacrificial efforts, it was a slow step-by-step process for the allied forces to gain new ground, bit by bit each day until the whole continent of Europe was liberated, bringing an end to that world dreadful and costly conflict.

What we learn from this parable of the mustard seed is how great things come from small beginnings. There is great power and strength in beginning with nothing more than a vision and a conviction in the possibilities for a mission to grow to infinitesimal proportions. Just as seeds planted in a garden have to be cultivated and nourished, we also have to be nurtured in practicing the basic understanding of the Christian faith. We can set goals, but much of God's work gets done in God's time. We set the conditions for God to do the work but the harvest belongs to God.

Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God is based on the value of the spiritual in the material, the intangible in the tangible and the possibilities in what seems impossible. This makes the concept of the kingdom of God less a doctrine to be taught and more a possibility to be lived. This is why it is important to take a stand against all that is wrong and uphold what is right and good and just. It happens with volunteers teaching inner city youths who are at risk of falling behind. It happens with those who work for a better understanding between law enforcement officers and the public. It happens when we get serious about taking care of the environment as a gift to be preserved rather than exploited. In his 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."

One of the major factors that keep us from maturing spiritually is our obsession with unresolved issues and regrets. Until we learn to let go of them, we cannot be at peace with ourselves. The current production of *Mothers and Sons* at the Boston Center for the Arts features a gay couple and their six-year old adopted son. It centers on an encounter with a grieving mother

whose son died during the AIDS epidemic in the 1980's who had once been a partner of one the men. She had never reconciled herself to the loss of her son. In the end, the six-year old child reaches out to her by asking her to be his grandmother. She is overcome with the innocence of the child and finds consolation for the first time in her miserably unhappy life. That child reaching out to her was the seed that enabled her to be released from the imprisonment of her resentment and sadness. Inner healing begins when we let a painful past heal from the inside out.

Thomas Moore in his book, *The Care of the Soul*, tells how we can cultivate the depth and sacredness of life by knowing the difference between care and cure. Too often we seek to relieve pain by trying to cure old hurts that cannot be cured. Caring for our soul involves working through our hurt and pain before we can move on. We have to root out and let go of old issues that prevent us from being able to function. To get on with the business of living, we have to get beyond ourselves. Whatever future we have depends on how we are able to deal with past issues that hold us back.

The foundation for the kingdom of God begins with faith as small as a mustard seed that must be nourished and cultivated. We take a major step in our spiritual growth when we learn to experience finite disappointment without losing infinite hope.

Our growth as a parish requires having our priorities in place and remaining focused on them. It is our faith and determination that will enable us to continue our witness of the Christian faith and the Episcopal Church in West Roxbury. What great things are being done when a small but faithful community of Christians has a common purpose and determination to be faithful to our calling!