

Readings: 1 Samuel 15:34-16:13, Mark 4:26-34

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I heard Diana Butler Bass speak recently at the Festival of Homiletics in Atlanta. She is the author of “Christianity for the Rest of Us,” which chronicles the health and vitality that exists in our mainline churches in America. She told the following story, which I will try to tell from memory.

Bass comes from a very theologically conservative environment, having gone to Gordon Conwell Seminary in New England. She tells the story of how her life changed one day, moving her in a new direction. Walking across the campus deep in thought and asking God for guidance, she stopped by a bench to rest for a moment. Suddenly, a book flew down from the sky and almost hit her. After she got over the shock, she picked it up, and saw that it was a copy of Albert Schweitzer’s “Quest of the Historical Jesus.”

Schweitzer’s writings about an historical-critical method of understanding Jesus and the movement that followed him would have been somewhat akin to the “Jesus Seminar” of its day, as it challenged many of the traditional suppositions about Christianity.

Bass slowly recovered from the shock of this book falling from the heavens, and started to read it as the sign from God it was. Soon, she was taking courses from Henri Nouwen at Harvard, and her thinking and faith opened up. She flourished.

The mystery of the life-altering religious experience of the flying book was eventually explained. She told the story to fellow students on campus, and one of them told her about being in a theology class on the top floor of the building. The professor spent some time on a particular day shooting holes in Schweitzer’s method in every way he could, and when he was done, he lifted up a copy of Schweitzer’s book and said, “*This* is what we should all think of the ‘Quest of the Historical Jesus,’” whereupon he walked to the window and flung the book out into the air. Where it almost hit Bass and instead began to change her life; the consequence of which ran counter to the professor’s intent (proving again that pre-rehearsed histrionics almost always fail to assist anyone in making their point clear).

Things shift. Change happens. From very small beginnings our lives move in a new direction when we are not looking. Our world is so interconnected, that as one theory called the “butterfly effect” goes, the flapping of a butterfly’s wings might create microscopic changes in the atmosphere that may ultimately alter the path of a tornado in a location halfway around the world. Growth, change and strength come from infinitesimal beginnings.

All things must pass. All things must change. Today’s story in I Samuel is a story of a sea-change in the history of Israel through the choice of the smallest shepherd boy to rule instead of King Saul. The handsome young musician, psalmist and sheep-herder named David begins a line of kings that will draw a lineage directly to Jesus. This summer, King David plays a large role in our readings so that we can understand how he fits into our collective story.

The story starts with a question, though. What kind of God is being reflected in the story of the deposing of King Saul and the investiture of King David? Why is Saul out of favor? Just before we enter this text, it tells of God’s further rejection of Saul. He has won various wars, but God says through Samuel: “I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me, and has not carried out my commands.” Saul’s orders from God were to *utterly destroy*, to annihilate, in a holy war, the Amalekites, including their possessions. But Saul has disobeyed: he has spared their king, and allowed his soldiers to keep the best of their livestock. As Samuel has turned to leave, Saul has grasped the hem of his robe, tearing it. Samuel has taken this as evidence that “the LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you...”

The king's refusal to start a holy war in order to kill every member of a tribe, and instead to let them all live, should be evidence of the kind of faith we want to see in a leader, not the use of religion that we hear too much of today that creates the kind of dualism that separates people into "good" and "bad," and causes people who believe they are on the side of "good" to go out and kill.

This kind of theology is what brings a man to seek out a doctor where he is ushering at his Lutheran church, and shoot him in the name of God. This is the sort of bad theology that makes a man feel so threatened near the end of his life, that he would shoot an African-American guard at the Holocaust Museum. It is time that we moved beyond such dualistic thinking and ask ourselves instead, why it is that we have a window of opportunity, small as we are, to bring the kind of change that advances the human situation known as the "realm of God." How can we flourish in our own lives and be a part of that change?

God commands Samuel to make a journey to Jesse and his family, secret lest Saul kill him. He is to appear to be on a pilgrimage. Perhaps the elders are let into the secret, as they are to *sanctify themselves*, perhaps wash ritually in preparation for a consecration. Jesse's sons are presented to Samuel, the eldest first, but it is the youngest, David, whom God has chosen - and whom Samuel anoints. David has gained legitimacy as future king of Israel.

David is no more than a boy who sings songs while watching his father's flocks. If it is so with David, who are you in the scheme of things?

Are you, like David, so small that your part in life is no more than making a little music while performing your assigned task? Or, like David, are there repercussions to your life that beat like butterfly wings in order to make a difference that can be felt on the other side of the world? Are we so sure of our insignificance that we don't pause to ask the question of whether or not our relatively diminutive position in the universe can make a difference?

People grow and mature at different rates. Thomas Edison's teacher said he could never amount to anything and advised his mother to take him out of school. Winston Churchill was admitted to school in the lowest level classes and never moved out of the lowest group in all the years he attended Harrow. Albert Einstein seemed so slow and dull that his parents feared that he was mentally deficient. One observer has said, "Great minds and high talent, in most cases, cannot be hurried and, like healthy plants, grow slowly."

It must be the same way with this thing we call, "the realm of God." We scatter the seed, but we are not ultimately responsible for its growth. We cannot make things happen. The process by which the way of this world becomes the realm of God proceeds very slowly, and it exasperates us. But, at the same time, if we have faithfully scattered the seed, we are not to blame for its failure to appear in its fullness. In the parable of the mustard seed, Jesus is cautioning us to just be patient.¹

Is it just possible that you have already made a difference, and is it also then possible that you are capable of doing so much more, no matter where you are in your life right now?

What are the questions we ask ourselves everyday? "I need to start doing "X" more in my life so that I might reach a level where 'this' or 'that' can open up for me." "I would like to contribute more, but I would not know where to begin—everything is so complex, and who am I, after all?"

Jesus tells a parable about the smallest of seeds that begins to grow. The day will come, he says, when the results of silent, steady growth will be impressive. Meanwhile don't be surprised if the seeds you plant look ineffective. Don't be surprised if the witness you have to offer gets laughed at on account of looking so puny. It's the old "Jack and the Beanstalk" fable: Jack's mother scorns the tiny beans he brings home from the market. They can never live off those! So in anger she hurls them out the window. Those beans were a non-starter, a mistake, a dead-end

nutritionally and in every other sense. Except that, of course, they ended up sprouting into a beanstalk that went clear up to the skies.²

Who are you to think that you are smaller than a shepherd boy who sang songs to his own accompaniment? Who are you to think that the seeds of new-thinking, new life and new being that could change your life could suddenly fall down from some celestial (or even very real) window and sprout around you?

Last night we celebrated the wedding of Dave and Laura. It was a celebration of new love that brings light into our lives.

Today we celebrate the knowledge of how two people can affect us so deeply, in having to say, “good-bye” to Marcia and Steve as they leave us for a new and exciting chapter in their lives. How can we not say that our lives are not touched deeply whenever another person reaches out and shares in community with us?

The tale of the smallest shepherd boy in the house of Jesse, and the parable of the mustard seed informs us that from the smallest of beginnings, we have the power through the love that we bring to the world to share, to change the world.

As Gandhi said, “Be the change you want to see in the world.” The power to do so is already within you.

Amen.

Sermon Resources

1. David G. Rogne, “Patience Is Important,” Sermons for Sundays after Pentecost, CSS Publishing
2. Scott Hoezee, “Mystery Seeds.”