

Cycle B, Pentecost 2
June 14, 2009
Mark 4:26-34

It was a joke, but one of those jokes where you kind of had to be there. We wouldn't have gotten it, but those poor peasant farmers gathered around Jesus would have. A farmer plants a mustard seed in the ground, or in his garden, as Luke puts it in his version of the story. Already those farmers would have been chuckling. Everyone knows that a mustard plant is a pesky weed, a nuisance to be gotten rid of. It would be like a neighbor planting dandelions in his front yard.

It is a joke, but with a serious message behind it. These series of parables began with the Parable of Satan casting out Satan. The issue at stake is that we can either live by the power of Satan, which is the power of accusation followed by casting out - the way of vengeance and retaliation, or we can live by the power of the Holy Spirit, which is the power of forgiveness (or to use St. Paul's word, reconciliation). Two radically different ways of being in the world.

We are faced, then, with a choice; whose kingdom shall we live in, whose rule shall we follow? This week's parable of the mustard seed presents to us God's way of forgiveness and reconciliation, but it also acknowledges that, in the eyes of the world, it is a crazy garden to live in. When others see us choosing to follow this Way, we will seem very out of place as we try to live out forgiveness in a world based on vengeance

We don't have to look very far to see this at work in our world today. Some of our national leaders are reaching out to a world that has grown hostile to us. They are attempting to extend the hand of peace, humbly acknowledge our past wrongs, listen to those with complaints against us, seek common ground, and move toward mutual understanding and reconciliation. And the pundits and politicians in the opposition are screaming bloody murder. They are crying out that this makes us look weak, that the only way to meet hostility is with an equal measure of hostility, that the only way to bring peace is through inciting fear with the threat of force. They think that those living out forgiveness in a world based on vengeance look pretty silly.

But we don't have to look that far. We can look to our own experience. When someone has harmed us, our first impulse is to seek retaliation. Anger rises in our bellies, and we want to hit back. Whether it's in our wiring or in our learning, the reaction is predictable and swift. Forgiveness may be on our lips, but vengeance may very well be in our blood or our DNA. And the idea of responding to violence with forgiveness and compassion just seems ridiculous.

And yet, in this parable of the mustard seed planted in the ground, there is the promise that the seed of forgiveness and reconciliation, though it is so small in our hands, so insignificant and seemingly ineffectual, will produce amazing results. Although it is the smallest of seeds, it becomes the greatest of all shrubs. Although the power of reconciling love seems silly in the eyes of the world, it has a silent, hidden power that can turn the world upside down, and bring a bit of heaven to earth.

I was a Peace Corps volunteer in the Philippines back in 1979-1981. Even though I lived in a remote seaside village, beyond electricity and paved roads, I witnessed life under the brutal dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. The day I arrived in my village, my bus pulled away from the central market to reveal a parade of soldiers carrying the bodies of a dozen peasant farmers from the mountains. Their crime was that they had allegedly been aiding the anti-government insurgents. Their bodies were lined up against the town hall for over a week, their stench a harsh reminder that you don't mess with Marcos. Later in my term, church authorities in a Kabankalan, a village down the road, found the bodies of eight religious lay workers buried in the back yard of the Mayor. Their only crime was that they had been teaching poor farmers how to read, introducing them to the Bible, and forming small farming co-ops. Any attempt to empower the poor was seen as a threat to the established powers. The message: don't mess with Marcos.

In a few years, a great change happened, a revolution, that would bring down the Marcos regime. I wasn't there for that momentous event, but I caught a glimpse of the beginnings of that revolution. I was visiting a priest friend in Kabankalan. There was to be a protest against the brutality of the local government and deaths of those eight religious lay workers. The military was lined up all around the town square, expecting violence. Their guns were loaded and ready to fire. The air was tense. And then they came, a single file procession of poor farmers, thousands of them, marching around the town square in front of the armed soldiers, in complete silence, many barefoot, some carrying pictures of those who had been murdered, some simply carrying palm

branches. Their demand was for justice; but their methodology was peaceful, non-violent resistance. They had learned this way through their study of the scriptures and their reading of Jesus' passion and death. They were imitating the way of the cross, confronting violence and injustice with reconciling love.

A few years later, the Marcos regime would come tumbling down, and not a drop of blood would be shed. One picture published in newspapers around the world captured the gist of what happened. A line of soldiers, with their machine guns pointed and prepared to fire, are confronted by a line of nuns and other regular folk. Standing there, with guns pointed at them, these religious folks are extending their hands to the soldiers, offering flowers. The Reign of Satan meets the Reign of God. The way of violence and vengeance meets the way of forgiveness and reconciliation. In the end, it was the power of love that won.

In his last days, when Jesus was confronted by the powers of his day, the whole religious and political establishment determined to crush him and his silly little revolution, he met those forces with forgiveness and love. It would be crazy to think that he was any match for them, and yet crazy would win the day. The seed that fell to the ground, the seed that died and was buried, sprouted and grew. And the power of God's love that raised Jesus would be raised up in those who would receive his love and decide to follow him. Love would sprout up in small bands of believers dedicated to the power of forgiveness and reconciliation, and then it would spread to other groups, near and far. Like a weed it spread, and it became a movement that swept the world.

Forgiven people extending the hand of forgiveness to others, healed people becoming healers, those grasped by love of God sharing that same love. Once the seed was planted, it could not be stopped. Trying to stop it would be like trying to stop those dandelions. Anyone who has ever had problems with dandelions knows this: pull up one, and ten more grow up in its place.

And so, then, let us bring it back home a little bit. Wherever you are in your life right now, whether at work or at home, if you are like me, you are met each day with the option of living in the kingdom of this world or in the kingdom of God - living in violence and retaliation or living out the grace and love of God - with your spouse, with your children, with your coworkers, with your boss, with your clients, with your neighbor, with the person standing in line in front of you at Gelson's. When people harm us or where there is conflict or strife, it is so easy to give into the impulse to hit back - to gossip, to judge, to tear down, to destroy - but those are precisely the places where the seeds of reconciling love need to be planted. And you, my friends, you and I are the designated farmers.

We are people who have been covered in the love of Jesus, washed in the waters of baptism, fed at the table of grace, forgiven and reconciled to God. We are people who have been called to follow him in sowing the seeds of God's love right here, to live out forgiveness and reconciliation in a world based on vengeance. It might seem like we're just planting dandelions in the yard, but actually, we are planting seeds that will help bring about a whole new world.

