

Time Zones

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Trinity Church in the City of Boston
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1 Sam. 15:34-16:13; Ps. 20; 2 Cor. 5:6-17; Mark 4:26-34

When I was a college student on the west coast, every few weeks, the telephone would ring between 4:30 and 5:00 am. I knew, as I swam up to consciousness from a deep sleep, that it would be my mother, calling from the east coast. I knew also that if I buried my head under the pillow and ignored the phone, she would call my friends or even the police at that hour, frantically certain that I had been picked off by the fiendish forces on the loose in Berkeley, California in the sixties. So, I would answer the phone, and she would invariably say, "What's the matter, are you sick?" And I would reply, "No, mom, I was asleep. It's 5 am here." And she would invariably say, "Really? Here it's 8 o'clock." As long as I lived there, we did this dance. My mother and I never resolved the time zone thing.

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The time zone thing. I want to talk this morning about the time zone things that we encounter in the two parables Jesus tells in the Gospel passage for this morning. New Testament scholar, Bonnie Thurston, points out that when we read or listen to Scripture, we are simultaneously in three different "time zones." The first is the time of Jesus, the time when he walked the earth. The second is the time of the community that wrote down what Jesus said and did. In our case this morning that would be Mark's community. And the third is the time or time zone in which the reader is living. In our case, day in, day out, ordinary time, 2006.

In the next few minutes we'll look at the two parables we hear this morning - the parable of the growing seed and the parable of the mustard seed - as to what they may have signified in the time zone of Jesus' time and the time zone of Mark's time. And then, consider what they may signify for our time zone.

1. Jesus' time zone: The parables are about the Kingdom of God, Jesus says. The Kingdom of God, as you know, is the center and core of all Jesus' preaching, teaching and healing. His miracles are signs of the presence of the Kingdom of God. The small community of followers that he gathered around him is being instructed by him in that time zone as to how to carry the message of the kingdom of God into the world when he is no longer with them.

I like to remember that we read these Bible texts, knowing of the great and beautiful thing God did through Jesus' death and resurrection. We know the glory and the good that came out of the suffering and the dying. But the parables we hear today come before the glory, and before the glory only a small and rather ragtag bunch of people stuck with

Jesus. Yes, he attracted the crowds here and there, but they didn't do the day-in-day-out living out that he expected his disciples to do. And he wasn't a smashing success by any stretch of the imagination. He didn't look like much, and his message often didn't take hold well. But he kept on keeping on, because – in my view – he had discovered God in the depths of his being and in the humanity of other people. And he deeply and convictedly accepted as true that God sows God's energies within the receptive human heart.

Throughout his very brief ministry he tried all he knew how to do to open the hearts of the people around him so that there would be room in them for God to sow God's energies. And he told parables such as these to his followers and anyone else who would hear to fortify them. Their role is to preach, teach and live as he lives. In so doing, he says, they will sow the seeds of the kingdom of God on earth. And God will take it from there. If they listen and respond to Jesus, God will take it from there. That is Jesus' message in his own time zone to his friends.

[Incidentally, that phrase, "the place where God sows God's energies," I took years ago from the late Joseph Campbell. I think it defines well the Kingdom of God, which is not a geographical location, such as Bermuda, but a way of being in this life in this world.]

"Preach, teach and be as I preach, teach and live," Jesus instructs his disciples. "In so doing you will sow the seed of the Kingdom wherever you go, and God will take it from there."

2. Mark's time zone: We think the Gospel of Mark was written about thirty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. We believe it was a community that suffered for their faith or a community that could see that suffering would soon descend upon it. Imagine what the recollection of Jesus telling these parables could mean to such a community. The first, the parable of the growing seed, might well bolster their courage and their resolve. God will give the growth, if they but continue to plant the seed as Jesus had instructed his disciples to do. Even as they may be suffering in one way or another because of the faith they profess, God is working to bring in the harvest. And the parable of the mustard seed? That smallest of seeds might well stand for their small community, their house churches, even. From such a small, threatened and apparently insignificant a community as their community, God can and will cause to burgeon the place where God sows God's energies, the very Kingdom of God. Just as the smallest of seeds can grow to be the most capacious of shrubs, so shall the Kingdom burgeon from the faith of even the smallest community that lives as Jesus calls them to live. These parables would have undergirded and sustained the life of the community, threatened as its members were.

3. Our time zone, 2006. Our time zone is very different, isn't it, from either Jesus time or the time of Mark and Mark's community? Over the intervening years Christianity became the official religion of an emperor, proceeded to girdle the globe, split into eastern and western churches, divided again into denominations. Within denominations there have been and continue to be splits, factionalism and family feuds. Our own United States expression of the Anglican Communion is concluding our General Convention at which

thorny issues have been prayed over, debated and argued. And yet, at the core of the life of all Christians remains our Lord and his expectation of us that we will make room in our hearts for God to sow God's energies. That we will make room for the Kingdom of God to come into us. That we will live according to the way Jesus lived and proclaim him and his way wherever we may be.

We have only recently, two weeks ago, celebrated the great Feast, Pentecost. That Feast concludes a period of about six months every year in which we move rapidly from one church season to another. We begin with Advent, preparing for Christmas, move into Christmas, then Epiphany, then Lent, then Easter, then Pentecost – six months of moving from one season to another in rapid succession – talk about crossing time zones! But now we have entered into the longest season of the church year, the season of Pentecost, also known as Ordinary Time.

Ordinary time. This is a season that brings home to us the holiness of day-in-day-out living. We're not preparing for a major feast, we're not celebrating a major feast. We are simply living in God's world in the time zone given to us. Ordinary time affords us the opportunity to look out for the wonderful things that can spring up from living together in quiet faithfulness, paying attention to the smaller acts and the invisible inward signs of God sowing God's energies. The hymn says, "For not with swords loud clashing nor role of stirring drum, but deeds of love and mercy the heavenly kingdom comes."

Ordinary time is time to give and receive deeds of love and mercy. This is not to say that we live unthreatened. No, we are not in bodily danger, at least not in our part of the world. But, the good news of Jesus and what God has done in him for the all the world is as little heeded as it ever was. The threats in our time zone kill the heart and the soul as well as the body: economic injustice, militarism, consumerism – you know what they are. We all do.

Yet by God's grace we know that God has sown God's energies within our heart, planted them. And we know that Jesus calls to us to pick up the seeds we ourselves are called to plant and to broadcast them – literally fling them as far and as wide by our own word and deed as we can. Jesus calls us to make room in ourselves for God to grow in us what God would have us filled with. Jesus calls us to discover God in the depths of our own being and in the humanity of others. To cultivate the confidence that God is working God's purpose out and to summon up the courage to let ourselves be used for that purpose no matter the cost to us.

In this, our time zone, let us tell and retell to one another Jesus' stories, stories such as these parables of the growing seed and the mustard seed. May they take new root in us in our time zone. And may we be impelled by them to broadcast the seeds and the deeds of the Gospel in our time zone in God's world.

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I began this sermon with a story about my mother and me. Now, partially because it is Fathers' Day, but mostly because I think it fits with our passage, I conclude with one about my Father and me. During that time period when I lived on the west coast, I devised a plan for my future that my father considered a poor one – unworthy of me, I believe he said at one point. He burned up the telephone wires – not at 5am – and fired off letter after letter, finally persuading me that I shouldn't commit to anything until we had a chance to discuss it on a trip home. I might say in retrospect that I very soon came to see what a loony plan it was. But at the time I was devoted to it. What happened, though, was that as I walked up the "chute" from the plane I saw my father - whom I both loved and admired and still do from this side of the grave and gate of death – waiting to meet me. And the thought came so clearly across my mind, "I cannot stand the thought of disappointing this man."

My thought today is this: what if... just what if... as we stand someday before our Father God, what if we were able to say in effect, "We just could not stand the thought of disappointing you and so we did our utmost to broadcast the seeds you gave us, for we knew we could leave the rest to you. What if..."

Amen.