

Sprouting Seeds and Bouquets of Humanity

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Mark 4:26-34

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About two months ago, the world was watching as various witnesses gave heartbreaking testimonies of the murder of George Floyd during the trial of Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin.

We heard from people like Genevieve Hansen, an off-duty firefighter and trained EMT, who was hoping to have a “peaceful day” and went for a walk, when she noticed the lights of a police car nearby and wondered if her co-workers were responding to a fire. As she got closer, that’s when she saw a handcuffed man who was not moving and a surrounding crowd who was becoming increasingly stressed out. She quickly begged for the police to check Floyd’s pulse and to begin CPR, but an officer simply responded that if she really were an EMT, she would know not to get involved.

Then there was Donald Williams, a security guard trained in martial arts, who was stopping by Cup Foods to get a drink after going fishing with his son earlier that day. He witnessed Chauvin use a choke hold on Floyd, and he called 911. He testified, “Yes, I did call the police on the police. I believe I witnessed a murder.” While some said that the crowd of surrounding people grew rowdier and angrier, Williams said, “we grew more and more pleading for life as Floyd became unconscious.”

There was Jena Scurry, the 911 dispatcher who initially sent police to Cup Foods, where Floyd had allegedly bought cigarettes with a counterfeit bill. Scurry watched the arrest unfold through a live feed on a camera across the street from the shop, and she actually thought that the video had “frozen” due to how long the officers remained on top of Floyd. She finally called a supervisory sergeant to report what she saw. “Call me a snitch if you want to,” she said on the audio of the call, “but all of them sat on this man.”

And, there was Darnella Frazier, the brave 18-year old who pulled out her cell phone and started filming what became a viral video of the arrest. She said, “When I look at George Floyd, I look at my dad. I look at my brothers. I look at my cousins, my uncles. Because they are all black...and I look at how that could have been one of them, too.”

We even heard the testimony of Darnella’s nine-year-old cousin, who was with her along the sidewalk outside of Cup Foods that day, wearing wearing a t-shirt with the word “Love” embellished on it. The 9-year-old girl said, “I was sad and kind of mad. It felt like they were stopping his breathing and it was hurting him.”¹

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-56581401>

As you could tell in each of their testimonies, it seemed as if all they could do from the sidewalk that day was to cry out and plead for help, but they each expressed regret, anger, and deep sadness that they couldn't do more to save George Floyd. Darnella said she still apologizes to Floyd in the middle of the night sometimes, asking herself if she could have done more.

It may be difficult for us to hear Jesus' words in today's gospel reading in light of Darnella's heartbreaking testimony. Because if all it takes is something as small as a mustard seed to make a difference in God's world, then why did Darnella and all of these other bystanders' efforts not seem to make any sort of difference at all? I mean – there was quite a scattering of seeds along the sidewalk that day. A marital arts instructor. An EMT. A 911 dispatcher. Why did none of their actions that day help to save George Floyd's life?

You'll find that I ask a lot of questions in my sermons that I don't have answers to as a preacher. Nor is it my job to have all the answers – as if any one pastor or person ever could – although many act as if they do. I think the longer I've been in ministry, the more I've realized all that we don't know. But also, the more I've learned about the importance of asking better questions – and asking them in community with other people.

After all, isn't that what Jesus did? He was often approached with questions throughout Scripture, and he rarely gave answers. One author says that Jesus is asked 183 questions in the gospels, of which he answers only 3. And today's story is no exception. A large crowd is following Jesus, and they must say something like, "You're not the kind of God we were expecting. Tell us about who this God really is."

And as is the case with Jesus, instead of giving them any sort of direct answer, he says. "Let me tell you a story. And so he starts telling them about farmers scattering seed, and how even a mustard seed, the smallest seed there is, can grow into this plant that is so large – even the birds can nest in its shade.

Now, this idea, while it may seem abstract to us, actually would have been familiar to most of Mark's audience. They would have known this image of a large tree with birds in its branches as being representative of powerful kingdoms. After all, the book of Daniel uses a large cedar tree as a symbol for the Babylonian empire, and it's used again in Ezekiel for the Assyrian empire. What's interesting, though, is that the story in Mark doesn't end with a mighty cedar tree, but instead with a mustard bush.

Ironically, some commentators note that mustard is actually NOT a plant in which birds build nests. Although mustard bushes reach a height of eight to ten feet in Palestine, they are actually not sturdy enough to support birds' nests. Birds may find shelter under the bush, but not in this garden herb. So what in the world is Jesus trying to say here? Is he making some kind of joke?

As Bible scholar Barbara Reid points out, "Rather than think of the "kingdom of God" as a majestic cedar tree from Lebanon, Jesus uses the image of a lowly garden herb that grows right

in one's own back yard. God's realm is not like a dominating empire, but its power erupts out of weakness. Its transformative power comes from unpretentious ventures of faith by those who would choose such an unlikely venue as Jesus in which to build their nests."²

And so, perhaps Jesus is saying, life in God's Kingdom is like a mustard seed – something so small and humble and unassuming that we often don't know if what we are doing in it can make any sort of difference at all, and yet we are called to act by faith anyway.

It's like what Shane Claibourne writes about in his book, *The Irresistible Revolution* from the time he spent at the Home for the Destitute and Dying with Mother Teresa in Calcutta. Claibourne writes, "I helped folks eat, massaged muscles, gave baths, and basically tried to spoil people who really deserved it. The goal was not to keep people alive (we had very few supplies for doing that) but to allow people to die with dignity, with someone loving them, singing, laughing, so they were not alone."

"Sometimes, folks with medical training would come by and be overwhelmed with frustration because we had so few medical supplies. We would explain that our mission was not to prolong life but to help people die well. While the temptation to do great things is always before us," he writes, "in Calcutta I learned the discipline of doing small things with great deliberation. As Mother Teresa used to say, "We can do no great things, only small things with great love."

Maybe that's what a mustard seed life of faith can do. And maybe that's what the bystanders to George Floyd's arrest did that day, too. They did small things with great love.

It's true that they didn't save his life that day. And even though Chauvin was found guilty of murder on three accounts, George Floyd still did not get the justice he deserved. But these small acts of love did help to bring about one thing, and that is accountability.

In a press conference after the trial, Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison thanked the public for their "long, painstaking work." He said, "I would not call today's verdict justice, because justice implies restoration. But it is accountability, which is the first step to justice."

He went on to say, "George Floyd mattered. His death shocked the conscience of our community, our country, and world. He was loved by his family and his friends. But that isn't why he mattered — he mattered because he was human. And there are no throwaway humans. There are no throwaway people."

Then, borrowing a phrase from the prosecuting attorney Jerry Blackwell, Ellison praised these brave bystanders who bore witness to George Floyd's murder, calling them a "Bouquet of Humanity" and he goes on to preach a sermon better than I ever could today.

² *Parables for Preachers: The Gospel of Matthew: Year A*

He says, “The people who stopped and raised their voices on May 25, 2020 were a bouquet of humanity: young and old, men and women, black and white. A man from the neighborhood walking to get a drink. A child going to buy a snack. An off-duty firefighter on her way to a community garden. Brave young women who pressed “record” on their phones.

“Why did they stop?” he asked. “They didn’t know George Floyd. They didn’t know he had a beautiful family. They didn’t know he had been a great athlete. They didn’t know he was a proud father. But they stopped and raised their voices and challenged authority because they saw his humanity and they knew in their hearts there are no throwaway people. And they stopped and raised their voices because they knew what they were seeing was wrong. And they were right.

These community members — this bouquet of humanity — did it again at the trial. They performed simple, yet profound, acts of courage. We owe them our gratitude for their courage in telling the truth to the world.”³

You see, perhaps those seeds that were scattered on the sidewalk at the corner of 38th and Chicago by Cup Foods did grow up into something beautiful and unexpected. Something that reminded us – and the rest of the world - what it means to be human. And that there are no throwaway people in God’s world.

And I can’t help but think that this is what the kingdom of God might look like here at Grinstead and Cherokee, too. It’s not a tall and mighty cedar tree; it’s a beautiful bouquet of humanity.

- It’s the loving and faithful witness of people who are young and old, gay and straight and trans and every other point along the beautiful rainbow spectrum.
- It’s people who went to Southern Seminary back in the day, and people who haven’t darkened the doors of a church in 30 years because they didn’t think any kind of church could love them any more.
- It’s Friday Church and Sunday Church. It’s people on the journey of recovery – each day striving to do the next right thing.
- It’s people who are here in the pews and people who are connected with us online both here in Louisville and all across the country.
- It’s people with a beautiful diversity of abilities and disabilities.
- It’s the newest babies born during the pandemic, and it’s folks at Trayton Oaks who can’t join us in person but listen faithfully every week.
- It’s this beautiful cloud of witnesses that surrounds us in this place – and people like Dave Nakdimen, Phoebe Delamarter, Cleve Iller, Jean Janes, Divina Park, Frank Tupper, and so many more.

³ Read the full transcript at https://www.ag.state.mn.us/Office/Communications/2021/04/20_ChauvinVerdict.asp. Special thanks to the wonderful reflection by David Schnasa Jacobsen for inspiring this idea: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-11-2/commentary-on-mark-426-34-5>

Friends, the seeds of this bouquet of humanity at Highland have been planted in big and small and faithful ways for over 125 years now. The question is – what kind of seeds are you and I planting today? What will be said of us when they reflect back on the post-pandemic church that gathered again at Highland?

That's another question to which I don't have the full answer – not yet anyway. But I look forward to asking it with you in the days ahead. Because I believe something new and beautiful is sprouting within us, Highland, and I can't wait to see the bouquet of humanity that God grows up at the corner of Grinstead and Cherokee in the days ahead. Amen.