

## "Seeds of Hope"

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister  
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, September 19, 2010

If you were here last week, you heard my sermon that ended with the idea that 'it's Friday, but Sunday's coming'. It's that idea of anticipation. It's that idea that we're living in a world that is not all we want it to be and yet we have hope that it can, and will, become better. But this idea, that things are going to get better, can be a kind of trap, too. We've all said it; you've said it, I've said it, "Things are going to get better..."

...as soon as I finish this project at work.  
...as soon as I pay off that loan.  
...as soon as I get my degree.  
...I mean, as soon as I get out of debt.  
...No, really! As soon as the kids are out of school.  
...just as soon as I get that promotion.  
...as soon as I lose those 15 pounds.

Then – *then* – things will start to get better.

*Then* we'll be able to start living how we want to live.  
*Then* our marriage and sex life will improve.  
*Then* I'll have the time to start exercising again.  
*Then* I'll stop drinking and gambling and smoking so much."

Promises, promises. Too often we live our lives as if they're on hold and like we're waiting for a time when we'll really be living. But does that day ever come? Does it ever come to people who are always saying, "Once I finish this, then I'll start living"? I'm not sure the day ever comes.

The question is, *what is the difference between a true vision of hope and a mere pipe-dream?* Very often a vision is nothing more than a fantastic future that people concoct to help them feel better about the miserable circumstances of their current life. In the time of Jesus, the Jewish people were living with an enormous tension between their everyday reality as a conquered and occupied people and their mythic vision of being God's chosen people. They had fallen a long way down from the days when they were ruled by great kings like Solomon and David. They had been divided and defeated and in decline as a nation for many centuries by this point. There was an enormous incongruity between their oppression by the Romans and their vision of being the saviors of the world. So they lived with the illusion that when the Messiah comes, then – *then* – we'll regain our glory and prestige, and peace and justice will once again fill the earth.

For the Jews of Jesus time, the coming of the 'kingdom of heaven' was an idea of great power, and triumph, and glory for them. And the hope, that such a day would come, helped them endure the ghastly circumstances of Roman oppression and domination. The symbol they had for the kingdom of heaven was the great cedars of Lebanon. These are trees like the redwoods of California that tower hundreds of feet into the sky. Have you ever seen the redwoods? That's a powerful image – tall, majestic, strong.

But then, this funky upstart from the backwaters of Galilee comes along and says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that a farmer plants in his field." Why would he say such a thing? "A mustard seed! Did he just say, *a mustard seed?*" "Ah, he's the carpenter's son; what does he know about gardening?" Have you ever seen a mustard plant? It's a shrub. It's practically a weed. In fact, it spreads so quickly and uncontrollably that they didn't plant mustard in gardens because it would overtake and overwhelm all the other fruits and vegetables. An educated listener in Jesus' time would have known that the mustard seed was considered by Jews to be an unclean plant and was not permitted to be planted in a farmer's field.

So why would Jesus compare the kingdom of heaven to such an act as planting an unruly, unclean weed into a farmers field? Because Jesus was all about undermining the distorted myths with which people live their lives, and the idea that the kingdom of heaven was going to come in a powerful blaze of glory from on high was not a vision that was helping his people live lives of meaning and purpose; it was a pipedream that was keeping his people oppressed. It was a vision that served to give them just enough hope to adjust to a maladjusted world. His aim was to undercut that distorted vision and replace it with a vision worth living for, even worth dying for; a vision that would not leave people biding their time, wasting their lives. A vision that did not leave people with a victim mentality that says, "There's not much I can do, I just have to wait on God." It's like *Waiting for Godot*.

So, instead of the image of a giant cedar, he offered a vision of an invasive shrub that grows about four feet high, with branches in which a few birds could perch at a time. The point being that the kingdom of heaven – or a world filled with peace and justice – is not going to come through some grand apocalyptic event in the future. Peace and justice will come through countless, common, everyday actions and occurrences. And so we must seek God and seek our hope in the common, everyday things. That's how it will spread and change the world: through small, common deeds, spreading like weeds, by regular people in ordinary communities. When Jesus said this, it was such an inversion of the thinking and culture of his time that even his own followers could not fully grasp it.

Catholic theologian Thomas Keating explains that there are four versions of this parable; three in the synoptic gospels (which are the first books of the Christian Bible) and one in the Gospel of Thomas, which was part of a set of gospels that are not in the Bible, but that were uncovered in the last century, and many scholars believe they more accurately reflect the original oral versions of the parables. In the Biblical books of Luke and Matthew, contrary to all botanical good sense, the mustard seed grows into a tree. In Mark, it grows into the greatest of shrubs. Keating says, “All of these expectations are contrary to the facts. The mustard seed does not become a tree, the greatest of shrubs, or put forth a great branch, however much one may want it to.” He goes on, “The oral tradition was evidently influenced by the old expectations of grandeur [so the parable, by the time it was recorded] ... lost its radical thrust.”<sup>i</sup> In other words, God is not going to appear in a blaze of glory to make the crooked straight, the sick well, or let the captives go free. If there is going to be freedom, justice, and mercy in this world it will not come from the sky or from one great heroic leader. It will not come in a big apocalyptic deliverance. It will arrive more like dandelion seeds and its shining yellow face will slowly pop up in lawns and gardens, and in other ordinary places, and in other mundane ways.

The kingdom of heaven is like going to the Day Alliance here at All Souls and watching a 97-year-old woman give a talk on Harriet Tubman. Millie did this when she was already on hospice, which means she was actively in the process of dying. It means she gave her talk knowing that her 97 years of life were winding down to the final pages of the final chapter. But Millie is passionate about Harriet Tubman and the stories of the Underground Railroad. Millie even made a new friend at church, not even half her age, Nicole. And she convinced Nicole to help her with her talk by singing some of the Negro spirituals that were not mere music; they were maps, messages and much more.

I learned about a lot more than Harriet Tubman that afternoon at church. I learned about what happens when we are connected to our passion and when we stay engaged as life-long learners. I learned about what happens when a white woman named Millie, born in 1913 in Ohio, befriends a young black woman named Nicole, born in 1968 on the Southside of Chicago. The story has even more meaning if you know that Nicole lost her own mother when she was only 16 years old. So when she tells of going to Millie’s house to prepare, and of climbing into Millie’s bed with her for a couple of hours, and listening to her weave tales of the great slave emancipator, Harriet Tubman, I could hear in Nicole’s voice how she was as moved by Millie and what she was doing as she was inspired by Tubman and what she had done.

That’s how the kingdom is built – in the queen-sized bed of a queen-like woman who, despite having only the possibility of days or weeks to live, still wants to make new friends, and

share her passion, and who, while on hospice, often had more vim and vigor than most people half her age. I'll tell you how to stay alive if you're old: stay engaged in church, keep making new friends, and never stop learning and teaching.

The kingdom of heaven is built in church kitchens over the hum and clanking of a commercial dishwasher, when a teenager who's working with an adult on clean-up after a pancake breakfast asks, "Did you ever do anything really bad; I mean so bad that you'd have done anything in the world to take it back?" And the adult knows it's time to get real.

The kingdom is built when a minister rushes to arrive on the scene of a crisis of a church member and that person's Branches group or men's group has already arrived and is setting out food and creating a list of who will provide meals over the coming weeks.

And the kingdom is built when a member of the choir is seriously ill and the rest of the choir calls her during rehearsal so they can sing her "her favorite song." And, even over the small speaker of a telephone, that song never sounded so good.

It happens in the Sunday school when a man who works with numbers and diagrams all week for his profession, suddenly discovers his true vocation because he feels his heart expanding whenever he's helping teach children about values and life. The kingdom of heaven is built through a million everyday things, by thousands of everyday people.

It's one of the reasons I love the story of God being born as a rosy-cheeked Jewish baby to a carpenter's wife on a bed of straw in the boondocks of ancient Palestine. Whether you believe he's God or not is not the most important point. The most important point of the story is to realize that God does not come in a blaze of glory. God comes in everyday encounters between everyday people. Through a mother's love and labor, amidst the feces and urine of a barn, the story reminds us that the divine does not descend on golden wings. The divine enters through the most common people and in the most ordinary ways imaginable; in the funk of life. Not *someday* when it all gets better. No. God enters in the midst of the stink and the stench and the blood and the pain and the grief and the confusion and the messiness of life. Are you hearing what I'm saying? Stop waiting!

The Buddha said, "Pay attention to each moment because in each moment is the gate to enlightenment." But whether you discover it in the pages of the Bible, the Dharma, or the latest bestseller by Deepak Chopra, the same principle applies: *Now is the time, and you are the one we've been waiting for.* Ours is not a vision to look forward to, that is meant to distract us from our lives. It is not a vision meant to placate us with some fantastic future. It is a vision that starts right now.

The reason I'm telling you this today is because I want you to get involved in the workings of the church this year. Take some classes, join a choir, help in the Sunday school, become an active part of the building of this community of hope. Why today? Because we have a program fair in our fellowship hall where you can learn about what programs are being offered. And next week we'll have another fair with opportunities to volunteer in our work inside and outside of the church: tutoring in schools, building homes, feeding the homeless, bringing meals. This is how we build the kingdom of heaven here on earth. It's like a mustard seed that a farmer plants in his field. It begins small, but spreads fast. And before you know it, it's taken over the place.

Remind me again, when does it begin? Now! That would've been outstanding if we were a Presbyterian Church in Scotland! Let's try it again, like the purpose of our lives depended on it! Remind me again, when does the future begin?

NOW!

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> *The Kingdom of God is Like*, Thomas Keating. The Crossroads Publishing Company. NY, NY 1997.