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God's Surprising Ways

June 13-14, 2009

Ezekiel 17:22-24

Thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out. I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs; I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain.

On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind. All the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD. I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the LORD have spoken; I will accomplish it.

Mark 4:30-34

Jesus said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." With many such parables Jesus spoke the word to the disciples, as they were able to hear it; Jesus did not speak to them except in parables, but Jesus explained everything in private to the disciples.



We are given two parables in today's lessons. Both of them tell us in a roundabout way how God chooses to act in surprising ways in nature. Perhaps we shouldn't be too surprised, after all, God created us, and we're pretty astonishing! I want us to hold in our minds those parables of surprise from how God acts in nature as I ask us a related question today: Is MCC QC relevant in the world today? What good is it? As I reread the scriptures for today all I could think about when it mentioned birds of the air is that mother robin that made her nest in the awning of the entryway at Jim's House next door—the robin who dive bombed Deb Calsyn-Polsen so often in valiant attempts to protect her chicks. And we put up with all that, and now we have an empty nest and lot of poop all over the front wall at Jim's House.

I have to tell you I was moved by two pieces of poetry I came across in researching this message. One of them that always moves me whenever I take the time to read it is Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken."

"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and sorry I could not travel both and be one traveler, long I stood and looked down one as far as I could to where it bent in the undergrowth;

"Then took the other, just as fair; I shall be telling this with sigh, somewhere ages and ages hence; Two roads diverged in a wood, and I – I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."

Let us pray: God who journeys with us, keep us real, make us keen observers of the road, and help us to choose paths less popular, more difficult, and infinitely more rewarding. Amen.

Again I ask the question: Is MCC QC relevant in the world today? What good is it? You noticed that I didn't ask that question about "the Church." For too many years, people have grown quite accustomed to equating the Church with a building. It is a place. And not a particularly relevant one in the world today. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that if all of the Church buildings in the world today immediately vanished tonight at midnight, the world would go on its merry way just fine, thank you.

For some people, knowing the Church is not, in fact, a building, they come to think of the Church instead as an institution—just another institution among many in our society. It has governing bodies and boards; it has budgets and even products—products such as worship, or perhaps to a lesser extent charity. To those outside of the institution, the Church as an institution is about as relevant as a funeral parlor. We recognize there is some need for it, but we have no personal connection to it or relationship to it—until we have some need of it. As an institution, I would argue that the Church today is an unequivocal failure.

Ah, but what's the catch? You noticed I didn't ask about the relevance of the Church, I asked whether MCC QC was relevant to our world. That's because the Church is not, in fact, either a building or an institution. The Church is the people of God. It is much more dynamic and much more of a living organism than any building or institution.

So what does it mean for MCC QC to be the people of God? First of all, it means things won't be easy—just ask Moses, or Ezekiel, or Peter or Paul or Gandhi or Martin Luther King or Troy Perry. Being the people of God usually means following a difficult path, the road less traveled. Mountains are wonderful, until you have to climb one! But it is in the climbing we learn lessons we need to know. God's love is a seeking, searching kind of love! It calls us when we'd least like to go and it's a very hard kind of love because we CANNOT understand it. Who can know the mind of God and who can understand God's ways? Being the people of God is about learning to appreciate the journey. Someone preached a very short meaningful sermon one day. He observed a tombstone—the person's name, date of birth-dash-date of death. It was the dash that made all the difference in the world.

We are being the people of God at MCC QC only when our dashes are making a difference to others—to our fellow travelers. I once made a sign for a Church where I pastored and today I offer it to you:

Wanted for Christ's sake:

Those who are LONELY, BORED, UNFULFILLED,
STRESSED-OUT, WORRIED, GUILTY;
WHO FEEL USED OR ABUSED.

Those who are SEARCHING, LONGING, QUESTIONING, WONDERING.

God has a place for you among God's children at MCC QC. A place of love where we can all grow together in Christ.

Now think about that for a minute. If we have a message, a shared journey with the folks described in that sign, shouldn't our pews be overflowing with people? I'll bet you know SOMEone who is: lonely or bored or unfulfilled or stressed-out or worried or guilty or who feels used or abused. I'll bet you know SOMEone who is searching or longing or questioning or wondering.

If you come to be among God's people at MCC QC, our worship must be about more than singing the songs of faith; our worship must be about more than hearing the word proclaimed; our offerings must be about more than giving of our monies. All of those things mean nothing unless they are a part of how God makes a difference in our lives—unless they are about MCC QC being the people of God making the most out of our dashes in this time and in this place.

MCC QC is relevant because we take up a collection when someone is in need. MCC QC is being the people of God when we choose to support Winnie's Place—because those women who feel so used and abused so need a safe space to heal and call home for a while. MCC QC is relevant when we help build a Habitat for Humanity Home. MCC QC is being the people of God when we raise our voices in prayer for one another, when we praise God in song because we are learning to appreciate our journey together. Unlike what I said earlier about church buildings, if suddenly all God's people at MCC QC were to just disappear, I do believe the world of the Quad Cities would notice and the community would go wanting. Although I don't believe we have yet come close to achieving our full potential.

I am proud to be the pastor of MCC QC, because MCC QC is relevant. Like the mustard seed, that starts from the tiniest faith, but grows and reaches with outstretched limbs to embrace all of the birds of the air. The other poem that moved me as I researched this message was "Natural Resources," by Adrienne Rich—I think of MCC QC as one of God's Natural Resources:

"My heart is moved by all I cannot save; so much has been destroyed. I have to cast my lot with those who, age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world."

Thanks be to God for the people of God at MCC QC. –but SHHH!!! It's secret! Don't tell anybody....