

## **Spirit-Given Life**

Mark 4:26-34

Romans 8:1-8

The Year of Our Lord 2020 has brought a few questions into sharper focus. Will we ever heal race relations in the United States of America? How can we get past a poisonous political climate in which so many seem intent on destroying their “enemies”? Why can we not seem to make wise public health policy decisions until it's too late? As I've thought back over the sermons I have preached since mid-March I have realized they often have asked another question: How can we hold onto hope when our world seems headed into the dumpster?

Our Bible passages today answer this question differently. One may make more sense than the other for you. But I submit we need both to get the whole answer. Romans 8 gives us a theological summary of how God justifies sinners. Mark 4 gives us Jesus' depiction of the entrance of the Kingdom of God into this world. Let us take them in turn, to see how they can bolster our hope.

Romans 8 opens with the claim that “there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” The Apostle Paul means that God will not condemn us when we accept the gift of faith in Jesus Christ from his Holy Spirit. When we “walk according to the Spirit”, we walk toward obedience and away from “the flesh”. Unsteadily, with

many detours, we walk according to God's will and not our own. We “set (our) minds on the things of the Spirit.” These “things of the Spirit” are the gifts of the Spirit: love, peace, patience, forbearance and the like. We enter into life in Christ when we have faith in him as our Savior, and when our lives manifest those gifts.

Our hope comes from our grounding in the Holy Spirit of God. We can have hope in the midst of 2020 when we receive these gifts God longs to give us. But we have not yet addressed the central point of Romans 8, the point on which our relationship with God hinges. Romans 8:3: “For God has...(sent) his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh.” Jesus came in the “likeness” of flesh. He looked like us. He was human in every regard, Paul elsewhere states, “save for sin”. Not a sinner, by dying on the cross Jesus put to death the tyranny of sin over human nature. Though we still disobey God, in Christ God has restored our broken relationship. Only thus can we have life and peace.

The Spirit gives life. In his autobiography, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas, the escaped slave wrote, ““From my earliest recollection, I date the entertainment of a deep conviction that slavery would not always be able to hold me within its foul embrace; and in the darkest hours of my career in slavery, this living word of faith and spirit of hope departed not from me, but remained like ministering angels to cheer me through the gloom.” These words apply directly to human slavery. They apply also to humanity's slavery to sin.

As a young teen Douglass tried to escape Thomas Auld's farm on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. In retaliation, he was loaned to another slaveholder, Thomas Covey, a man notorious for "breaking" slaves. Covey whipped Douglass repeatedly with a cat-o-nine tails on his bare back. At sixteen Douglass physically battered Covey in a fist fight, who—miraculously—reacted by toning down his savagery. On his return to Auld's place Douglass fell in love with Anna Murray, a freed black who worked in the kitchen but subsequently moved to Baltimore. Using a secret network of couriers, they corresponded. (Auld did not know Douglass could read and write.) Murray sent Douglass cash, false papers, and a Navy uniform. Assuming the identity of an actual freed black seaman, Douglass boldly boarded first one train, and then another. In less than 24 hours he reached Quaker Philadelphia and his freedom.

Brilliant and proud, Douglass became a fierce leader in the Abolitionist cause. And he kept his faith in Jesus as the liberating Savior. When he wrote of "this living word of faith and spirit of hope" he meant it theologically and practically. His faith in God and God's purposes kept alive his hope even when his back ran red with his own blood. And his hope was for both this world and the next. Whatever holds us in bondage, we can keep our hope alive by keeping our faith alive, by staying in Christ. I recommend that the next time you become nauseated by what you see on the evening news that you turn off your TV and turn to God in prayer. Ask for peace and hope. They will come.

The same Jesus who died on the cross told the parables we read today in the

Gospel of Mark. They belong to a set of seed teachings the writer grouped together in chapter four. In the first we read, the seed stands for the promises of God. God had spoken of old, in law and in covenant. Now Jesus had come, speaking of the fulfillment of God's plan, of the Kingdom of God which had started breaking into this world and would find its completion in himself. The harvest stands for the Day of the Lord, of judgment, when God would separate the sheep (who enter the Kingdom) and the goats (who do not). The Kingdom has implications in this world and the next.

In the second parable the seed remains that same Kingdom of God. The emphasis here shifts to its exponential growth. From something the naked eye can barely detect it becomes "the greatest of all shrubs". We might be tempted to scoff. A shrub? Why not a sycamore tree? They had them in the Palestine of Jesus' day. We have one in our neighborhood that fills me with awe after two years of looking at it. Likely Jesus chose the mustard shrub because while its seed is indeed minuscule, the shrub it produces becomes quite large. The point is the contrast, the growth, the potency of the seeds of the Kingdom.

Where might we look for the seeds of the Kingdom today? Watch a sermon preached in an African-American church. This week I watched the Rev. Raphael Gamaliel Warnock preach at Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church, in the pulpit once filled by Martin Luther King Jr. Preaching from Matthew's report of Jesus saying, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy burdened...for my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Rev. Warnock used Thomas Paine's line about times that try our

souls. He spoke of the burdens we carry, of other people's expectations of us, of our disappointments with ourselves, of our heavy yokes of fear and sorrow and guilt. He spoke directly to young black men (Dr. Warnock is a 51 year-old black man) and the short fuses so many of them carry in these days of racial tension.

Then Dr. Warnock turned to his prescription for weary and overburdened people: do what Jesus asks. Let him carry your burden. I found this sermon incredibly comforting. This man speaks from a respected position of leadership within the Black community. And he speaks with Frederick Douglass of the Spirit that gives freedom, peace and hope. Jesus died on the cross to free us from the wages of sin, which are death. His Spirit offers us the gift of faith in that, and in the person of Jesus himself. His Spirit also offers us support, encouragement, a sense of direction even in confusing times. This is the redemptive message that, if heard by enough people, can help heal our nation. And it is the Gospel truth. To find the seeds of the Kingdom, turn to God's word. Read it. Listen to it, whether preached here, or in Atlanta, or wherever.

And to find the seeds of the Kingdom of God, the gifts of the Spirit, turn to the givers. Linda and I know a family with four biological children. They have adopted six more, including a Chinese boy with a heart condition so chancy the authorities in his native country would not permit him any medical treatment. They did not want to “waste” resources on him. Another adopted girl has Down's Syndrome. Two others are sisters with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. They struggled to attach emotionally with their adoptive parents. One ran away repeatedly, starting at the age of five.

This couple are deeply Christian people. They see their parenting as their calling, their mission in life. They get by on the income from his photography business and support checks from various governmental agencies. I cannot call on anyone to imitate them to such an over-the-top extent. Linda and I have not. But I can hold them up as a source of life and hope in a dark world. Their faith in Jesus, crucified and resurrected to inaugurate the Kingdom of God in this world, has empowered them to change twelve lives, for as the wife and mother says, their parenting calling has given them more than they have given. They are not perfect. He is stubborn, he would tell you that. He and I butted heads over tempos and volume levels for the entire period of years we played in a praise band together. But we helped make some good music together. And they inspired not just us, but many people who came to know them in church and in town.

We need not go to such extreme lengths of generosity to plant the seeds of the Kingdom. We need only to give of the tiny seeds we have. Rescue a dog or a cat; mentor a child; adopt an elderly person; give time, energy and money to causes that gladden Christ's heart.

Look for the seeds of the Kingdom of God. They surround us. Sometimes they're so small they evade our notice. But they are there. And they can **grow**. As they do, they create greater and greater experiences of the life-giving Spirit: they bring peace, hope, purpose, forgiveness, even answers for all our questions. Things we **all** could use in the year of Our Lord 2020.