

Signs of the Kingdom
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For most of my life I have not been a morning person. I used to do better in the evening, partly due to the fact that in another life I had a job in which I worked until one in the morning. Mostly, though, it was because I am just wired that way. Generally, I find that I have more energy in the evening.

But over the past few years I have experienced a transformation. I now actually like to get up at heavenly-awful times, like 5 in the morning to go with Sue to the Recreation Center and get in a run. Well, let me put it another way: I like to get up that early once I am up and doing something. There will always be something in my makeup that just wants to turn over and go back to sleep. But it has been a revelation how much energy I have when I get up and get going.

Last week, though, I had a revelation of a different sort. It came on a day when I didn't run, which in these days of knee and hip aches is every other day. I walked out to get the paper, and then just stopped to take in the day. It was a kind of a hazy morning, the sun just up but not yet visible because of the clouds. And yet there was something special about that moment. It took me back to other early mornings I have known, early mornings of days when I was going on a trip or doing something else that was special and exciting. The morning felt full of potential, full of wonder. As it turned out, it was a day just like any other. But there was that moment of excitement, that moment in which all kinds of possibilities were laid out there at the start of a new day.

Every day has that. Every day has a beginning, a morning, when the sun is coming up and we are scratching the sleep out of our eyes, and a moment of clarity comes for us. It tells us that "This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it!" Words that are not just the call to worship for Robert Schuller's TV ministry; but words from the 118th Psalm, part of which we read every Easter. John Calvin, the founder of the Presbyterian-Reformed movement, felt that each Sunday was a celebration of Easter resurrection. But every day can be like that. Every day is filled with the potential for rebirth, for renewal.

In the very first Alban Institute event I ever attended, the consultant quoted a story from that noted theologian, Winnie the Pooh. Pooh and Tigger were walking along the road, and Winnie asked Tigger, "When you get up in the morning, what's the first thing that comes across your mind?"

Tigger replied, "What's for breakfast? What comes across your mind, Pooh?"

Winnie said, "I wonder what great and wonderful thing is going to happen to me today."

Our Bible texts have something to say to us about that, about the ways that we greet each new day – do we greet it with an attitude of "Good Lord, morning!" Or "Good morning, Lord!" Do we greet each day with dread and fear, or with joy and wonder?

In the I Samuel text, the people of Israel were having a tough time. Their king, Saul, was thought to be the greatest thing to come along since Moses, but then he started going off track. As a result, the people were floundering; they just didn't know what to do, they had somehow lost their way. Even the one who was their guide – Samuel, the prophet - was uncertain which direction to take. He's grieving over the fact that Samuel just isn't cutting it as king, while the Lord has long since moved on. Why do you keep grieving over Saul? God asks Samuel. I have rejected him, so get over it already. God then cooks up a plot to get a new king. Samuel is not so sure he wants to be in on this, because he knows that no king can possibly tolerate a rival. But God tells Samuel that it's morning, and something new is on the horizon.

Samuel obeys and trudges off, and when he comes to Bethlehem the town leaders are just as afraid as Samuel was. They know something is up, they know that Samuel and Saul have had a falling out, and they don't want the king's soldiers coming down hard on them. But Samuel keeps up the disguise, because something new is on the horizon.

That something was a new king. But who? He had already blown it once. He didn't want to do it again. So he knew that something new was needed. When all of Jesse's sons came before him, they were all wondrous specimens of masculinity – all worthy candidates of being the new king. Except for one thing: Looks aren't everything.

Humans look on the outward appearance, God tells Samuel. Humans look on how much someone is making, how big a house they live in, what kind of clothes they are wearing; did you get that shirt from Abercrombie or J.D. Crew? Are those shoes Nikes or Adidas? We live in a different time than Samuel did, but we still measure a person up on what we can see. Remember that obnoxious shampoo ad of a few years ago – “You never get a second chance at a first impression. “

I'm sure glad God doesn't work that way. I'm sure glad I get second chances, and so do you. I'm sure glad that God is big on do-overs; you know, those times when we were kids out playing ball, and everything goes haywire, and people start arguing. So someone yells out, “Do-over.” Let's do it all over again. God calls a do-over, and God calls on Samuel – and us – to remember some basic lessons about life and people. You can't judge a book by its cover. You can't tell a person by outer appearances. You can't blow off a day just because it starts off rough. In all of these, in each of these, God calls a “Do-over.” God gives us all a chance to begin again.

The Old Testament text moves on to the anointing of David as the new king, but I want to move over to a series of parables by the Son of David. Jesus has just given his disciples and anyone within earshot a parable about a farmer sowing seed into the ground. The farmer then goes off and does other things, but one thing he doesn't do is sweat whether the seed will come up or not. It isn't going to grow if he keeps worrying about it. He trusts, he has faith, that it will grow. Not of his own efforts to push from below. But the farmer trusts that the growth will occur, all in its own order, one part of the plant following another.

Jesus then goes on to tell the parable about the mustard seed – the smallest of all the seeds, but one which grows into a big plant, which gives rest and shelter to all the birds. Never mind that this particular plant was just a big weed. It's the way the thing grows from such a small seed that is the point, and what it does with its growth – it provides shelter; it is a safe place.

To get at what Jesus was saying here, go back to the beginning: “The kingdom of God is like this ...” Jesus is telling us what it means to live in God's Kingdom, the place where God is in charge; the place where people are not judged by outer appearances, but are given the opportunity to show what is in their hearts. It's a place where many people in today's churches are seeking to live. It is a place where it doesn't matter what you are wearing, what kind of a car you drive or how big a house you live in. It's a place where God is in charge, it's a place where growth will occur, and it's a place where people can feel safe.

It's a place and a time where we don't have to sweat the growth. We trust that the growth will happen. We trust that the crops will come up. We trust that there will be a harvest to bring in. That doesn't mean we don't have anything to do. We trust that if we tend to the plants and keep them watered and nourished, that growth will occur. We trust that if we create environments where people can share where they are and who they are and how they are changing and know that all of that is okay, growth will happen. It may not always be the kind of growth we were expecting, but that's all a part of leaving the growth in God's hands.

It's also a place and a time where the results are not always in numbers. It can be easy to judge everything by what we see – here's the bottom line, oh we only had this many people in worship today, oops we only brought in some many dollars. You need those things, I know, but we don't have to obsess with them. There are other kinds of results. Like the result of someone who is touched by the love of Christ. Like the one who goes to a nursing home and sits with an old friend. Like the people who share new insights about what it means to follow Christ and then take that to work with them. Like the one who has an idea about what the church can do that will touch the lives of people who live in the community.

When Jesus told these parables, the people who lived in these faith communities weren't the most influential people in town. Churches weren't big fancy buildings with tax-exempt status. The fellowship of Christ was just a bunch of people who gathered around the Word and shared that Word and the joy it brought; they weren't listened to by the rich and famous but used that word to touch the down and out. In the midst of all of that, they transformed the world by the example of their lives and the love which had touched them. They became people who were not showy in outer appearances, but whose heart-felt love made each day and each person an opportunity to witness the growth of Jesus Christ.

For those of us who make up the church these days, the parables of Jesus serve as a reminder that the results are not always what we can see. But that does not mean that we can sit back and take it easy. Our call is to open ourselves to the new thing God is doing through us

every day, and let God bring the growth. Our task is to greet each new day with “Good morning, Lord!” And expect incredible things to happen – a kid made king, a crop developing, a seed grown to bush; a church made new by the love of God through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Bible Text are I Smauel 15:34-16:13, and Mark 4:26-34
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