

Mark 4:26-34
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“Unconventional God”

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I want to begin this morning telling the story of my friends Nick and Tracy. A decade ago they were living in an expensive home in a historic neighborhood in Tampa, FL. They had a big house, a big boat, and two big cars. Nick ran a very successful Realty company and Tracy worked as the office manager.

They were rolling in money, but their marriage was constantly on the rocks. Fights, Finger pointing, lots of sleepless nights, the stress was too much. Then things got worse as the housing bubble broke. Nick was not able to keep paying Tracy, so in the middle of another one of their arguments, Nick calmed down and said, “Why don’t you go and do something you would really love to do, even if it means volunteering? The next day Tracy went to volunteer at the local Humane society doing anything they needed, she was a natural with the animals and the visitors. Quickly Tracy worked her way up to having a decent job at the Humane society. Best of all she came home happy every night.

But Nick, feeling more pressure than ever was still miserable. Finally, Tracy said, why don’t we sell the cars, the boat, the house and you can go back to school and do something you love. They decided to go for it. It was the scariest and most difficult decision either of them ever made. It seemed to fly in the face of all good reasoning. Every friend and family member were telling them they were crazy. But, Nick went back to school to train in something he always cared about... rebuilding oyster reefs and they were happier than ever.

Today Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed. On the one hand, as I shared with the children, a mustard seed represents how something that begins very tiny can grow into a decent sized shrub. But historians taking a look at the first century have discovered a scary side to the symbol of the mustard seed... It was an ancient, invasive, illegal weed which no conventional Jewish farmer would ever want in his garden. And we suspect, here again, Jesus is delivering a message about the unexpected path we may need to follow to participate in the Kingdom of God.

The parable today is inviting us to think out of the box. Giving up their home, and cars and boat seemed like a most weedy path to my friends Nick and Tracy. In the beginning they didn’t see how this could give them any level of happiness. But as they began caring for animals and rebuilding oyster reefs, doing things they loved...they found their joy didn’t come from how hard they worked, but from how they worked and the kind of work they did. And they realized they were happier even though they had less things.

Today Jesus is suggesting when we find ourselves struggling with direction in life or our sense of happiness, we might pay attention to those things God has laid upon our hearts. We go back to who God made us to be. We get so trapped in the web of conventional thinking of we have

to get more, make more, do more, we have to keep up with the “Joneses...” that we forget the passions God has laid upon our hearts.

We can't be scared when it comes to being Who God made us to be, even if we have buried it deep inside for years. But, sometimes changing direction to reclaim who God made us to be can be deeply frightening.

Some of you know the story of the Co-Founders of Habitat for Humanity, Rev. Millard and Linda Fuller. A brief Bio I found writes, “From humble beginnings in Alabama, Millard Fuller rose to become a young, self-made millionaire at age 29. But as his business prospered, his health, integrity and marriage suffered. These crises prompted Fuller to re-evaluate his values and direction. His soul-searching led to reconciliation with his wife and to a renewal of his Christian commitment.

The Fullers then took a drastic step: they decided to sell all their possessions, give the money to the poor and begin searching for a new focus for their lives. This search led them to Koinonia Farm, (*which several of us visited on an adult mission trip a few years ago*) a Christian community located near Americus, Georgia, where people are looking for practical ways to apply Christ's teachings.

With Koinonia founder Clarence Jordan and a few others, the Fullers initiated several partnership enterprises, including a ministry in housing. They built modest houses on a no-profit, no-interest basis. Homeowner families were expected to invest their own labor, called sweat equity, into the building of their home and the houses of other families. This reduced the cost of the house, increased the pride of ownership and fostered the development of positive relationships. Money for building was placed into a revolving fund, enabling the building of even more homes. Since 1976 Habitat has helped over 4 million people build or rehabilitate over 800,000 houses worldwide. That is a small seed, which became a giant shrub in which millions have found a home.

The parable of the Mustard seed invites us to be open to the Out of the Box God. Look where God may be challenging the assumptions we have made or the places in life where we have settled. Look where God may be inviting us to step back and review who God made us to be and how we might help build the common good in a way that gives us joy. The warning: It may include going down paths that seem very weedy.

My friends Nick and Tracy now live in a nice, simple Log cabin outside Roanoke, Virginia. They are happier than ever, they each work in jobs which they love, they don't overextend themselves financially anymore. They foster animals from the local Humane Society regularly. How did they get to this level of peace and joy?

They thought outside of the box, with courage and trust they were open to a spiritual path even though that path looked disastrous, they trusted enough to follow it.

May we too have the strength and courage to remember who God made us to be, follow our dreams and find life-giving ways to contribute to the common good, while building up our own good too.

Amen