

Sermon: For the Birds

Pastor Mollie Foster

Being busy and noisy make a lot of sense to us. It fits with our normal way of being human and finding purpose. We achieve all sorts of good by working hard and committing ourselves to our values; (translating into) well run offices, good grades, better schools, neatly trimmed lawns, and so on. These are reasonable things, just things, and certainly nothing useful would happen if we did not work for it or if we remained indifferent to moral and political issues.

We multi-task and schedule quality time with the people we love using fancy calendars, but also wishing and dreaming of a blank space to just be! Listening has also become a challenge. The world is so much louder than the past with no signs of quietness coming. To survive the constant barrage of noise, at times it feels like we've just tuned everything out. Even as I was writing this, I blurred out the Starbucks background noise with...NOISE! blaring through my headphones.

I believe in our world today, quiet contemplation has become a source of anxiety for many of us whether we long for it or have too much of it. Some of us might be tired of stillness, reflecting on what used to be, longing for an invite, companionship, a place to use your voice. The combination of time scarcity and difficulty in listening can make being present with God, ourselves, and each other challenging and exhausting. Believe it or not, in the ancient world, contemplation was valued more highly than action.

“For the ancients, the active life was merely a way of meeting material needs and maintaining a household, while contemplation offered a chance at transcendence, at union with the ideal or the divine.”¹

Our difficulty arises in confusing the way of the kingdom with our ordinary way of doing things. In today's Gospel from Mark, Jesus is calling us to a very different way of being with ourselves, with one another, with the divine, by asking us to recognize that spiritual growth and intimacy with God arises naturally as seeds growing.

This mustard seed parable is more than the tiniest of seeds growing into the largest bush. It's an example of what it takes to truly grow: reminding us that we must listen and allow space to be held by God beneath the service.

Following my first year of seminary at Garrett-Evangelical in Evanston, I spent my summer months studying and observing in South Africa at a Methodist seminary. Every evening the city of Pietermaritzburg would experience load shedding in two hour shifts. Load shedding was the governments way of controlling the amount of electricity used by the civilians.

So each night, I would lie on my twin bed, in a pretty empty and cold center blocked walled room, in total darkness. I could hear the sounds of life outside my window: people walking and cars driving by. I had no phone, computer, no way to be connected and it was unsafe for me to be anywhere but this place. I was left to my own thoughts and beating heart.

The truth was that, I was tired... And afraid. I struggled with feeling alone and overwhelmed, all from hiding who I truly was and my sexual orientation. I spent an excruciating amount of time over analyzing and overcompensating, keeping busy to avoid the stillness, consumed with anxiety of what others would think, what this would mean for my calling into congregational ministry, what would the church say, would I be identified as “Mollie...the gay person” rather than Mollie, the fill in the blank. Or Just Mollie.

¹ Palmer, Parker. *The Active Life*. (Jossey-Bass Publishing, 1990), 5.

All of these thoughts and fears (though valid) held me back, afraid to fully live, rather than listening to God, leaning into God, and loving God. This time of wrestling, questioning God for how I was made, allowed space and time for God to work within me. Just like the seed in the dark, cold, dirt hidden below the earth's surface...God was nurturing me.

A few weeks after returning from SA to Evanston, getting ready in my apartment just off the Noyes Purple line stop, I remember feeling the warmth of the morning sun rise through my east side facing bathroom window. I could hear the sounds of life and the hustle and bustle of the "L". I stood there, remembering my cold stillness in SA. Both situations, hearing the life outside the walls, I compared how different the two felt.

But understanding that God was with me just the same.

I realized in that moment just how alive I am, thankful for the time that God nurtured me and held me in the dark, nurtured and held me beneath the service, so that I may sprout up, be whole and live as God created me to be. I felt peace and able to bust through the dirt of fear and share with others who I was. I was in the process of transformative growth having being rooted in God.

Yes, God can be found in the chaos, in the busyness, in the noise...there have been many times I have encountered God on a train, the airport, the street, in meetings...**even church meetings!** But we must not run from the silence...the stillness...the absence of light...we should learn how to lean into it, trusting that God is also in the darkness as much as God is in the light.

Just the same, Contemplation and action are not contradictions, but poles of a great paradox that can and must be held together. In Mark, Jesus gives an example of how we, a loved and nurtured creation of God, are to bring forth the kingdom of God on earth; the place where contemplation and action intersect. I can't tell you how many times I've heard this parable of the mustard seed and I have greatly missed the entire ending of the scripture and it's call to action. Verse 32: "It produces such large branches **so that** the birds in the sky are able to nest in its shade."

This is parallel to Paul's guidance in 1 Corinthians, suggesting that this process of formation is much less about imparting information, growing in strength and power, at least initially, and much more about drawing people into a particular way of life in community. As people who listen to the Holy Spirit, our primary approach to inquirers and those on the margins of the faith should be to draw them into ministries of Christlike love and mercy.

In his book *The Active Life*, Parker Palmer states, "*The heart of spiritual quest is to know the rapture of being alive and to allow that knowledge to transform us into celebrants, advocates, defenders of life wherever we find it. The experience of aliveness must never degenerate into a narcissistic celebration of self, for if it does, it dies. Aliveness is relational and communal, responsive to the reality and needs of others as well as to our own. We need a spirituality which affirms and guides our efforts to act in ways that resonate with our innermost being and reality, ways that embody the vitalities God gave us at birth, ways that serve the great works of justice, peace, love...of new life!*"²

SO THAT we are transformed into celebrants, advocates, and defenders.

SO THAT the birds have a safe nesting place.

² Palmer, Parker. *The Active Life*. (Jossey-Bass Publishing, 1990), 8-9.

SO THAT children do not have question whether the church will turn them away for who they are, but rather welcome them, nurture them, teach them.

SO THAT all may find work and purpose, (and) that they might also have space to breathe

SO THAT no one has to hide in fear of who they are, but instead know that they are loved beyond measure!

SO THAT peace, restoration, may be found!

At Park Ridge Community Church we are invested in this full, wide, and deep growing process. We state that we are stretching upward in faith, outward in empathy, and inward in spiritual development. We desire to multiply our congregation's impact and outreach and to Nurture individual, family, and community needs. Every Sunday, I get the privilege to sit up here and see your face and see all the amazing gifts that is in the space.

Behind you rest a banner saying "Worshipping together since 1843". Think about all that has been done in the place over the years. We sit here because others planted the seeds, invested in the Kingdom of God, trusting that God would grow it bigger and beyond their imaginations.

What might we do now that will provide for those in the next 176 years? Must we think about who we are planting branches for in our future. What are we doing so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade? Who will come along and find rest in this place. How might we go beyond our walls to further the kingdom of God here and now; to show earth as it is in heaven? This is Gospel way of living.

What is your "**SO THAT**" and how are you allowing God to nurture you? I hope you can hear the voice of God working in you, nurturing you to a call greater than you can imagine. That you find a moment to pause, listen and be held by God in your loneliness, in your chaos, in your secrets, in your calendars, in the purpose of your being alive! There is nothing or no one too small.

Perhaps in working with these passages we should simply let them vibrate in their strangeness so that our habituated patterns of understanding and feeling begin to loosen enough to allow something of Jesus' strange and wonderful news to break into us.

SO THAT ...We may break into the world!