

The Smallest of Seeds: Making High the Low Tree

Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder

United Church of Strafford, Vermont

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Psalm 92; Ezekiel 17:22-24; Mark 4:26-32

Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, an Open and Affirming Congregation, on this Fourth Sunday after Pentecost. Welcome to you who are in the sanctuary and welcome to you online.

We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. We share the belief that the land and all life are gifts of the Spirit, and our role is to honor and protect the creation, building a loving community that includes all.

Joni Mitchell wrote the song “He Played Real Good for Free” in New York City in 1969. Here are some excerpts from it:

I slept last night in a good hotel
I went shopping today for jewels...
I was standing on a noisy corner
Waiting for the walking green
Across the street he stood
And he played real good
On his clarinet for free....
Nobody stopped to hear him
Though he played so sweet and high
They knew he had never
Been on their T.V.

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The song ends with Joni saying she meant to go over and listen but the light changed and she left him there. But that's irony at work, because the truth is, she did not leave him there. The spark of his creative love was like a seed in her that grew and grew until it *was* on TV and planted inside millions of people. It became a great tree and still is bearing fruit fifty-five years later.

It began as the briefest encounter, as one heart touched another, so please be sure to extend your love and care to one another today, play real good for free, so that every heart here may feel seen and heard and part of this loving community, and the seeds of love we plant here may grow and change the world around us.

Call to Worship Joni Mitchell saw the spark of the Spirit in a single street corner clarinetist, and the writer Madeleine L'Engle saw it in a single living cell in the book *A Wind at the Door*, a sequel to *A Wrinkle in Time*.

L'Engle imagines a cosmic struggle taking place between a force in the universe that extinguishes entire galaxies and the creative source of love and life and light. L'Engle wants us to see that the same struggle takes place everywhere on earth, and the struggle for life matters even in a single cell of a small child, for the child's sake and because the child may grow up to be a source of love and life and light that encourages many other cells and hearts and nations and all humanity to keep working toward the realm of that positive, life-giving Spirit on earth.

It is significant that a dove was the image of the Spirit of the entire universe that first filled Jesus. We find the Spirit in the smallest and humblest of things and in everything, and it makes all the difference in the world when we let it into our consciousness and open our hearts wide to its presence, so let us do so now as we worship that Spirit together with thanks and praise.

The Smallest of Seeds: Making High the Low Tree

Many people feel so discouraged about the world and our nation that they are not engaging in activities that could make a difference in the election.

This week Congress held hearings about the vast amount of clandestine social media election propaganda bombarding the United States from Russia, China and Iran. It is all intended to make us feel discouraged and be inactive, or to act in ways that destroy our democracy and weaken our nation.

This propaganda is effective because it builds on a foundation of truth. The truth is our nation is not perfect. The truth is that the world is changing in dangerous ways, and terrible things are happening. But is it true that there is no goodness left worth working for? Is it true that our small contributions make no difference? Is it true that the force of hate and destruction is too strong for love and life and light to overcome?

The prophet Ezekiel saw that his nation had abandoned the sacred way. Wealthy, powerful rulers showed no compassion for the poor whom they oppressed or the vulnerable whom they

neglected. The rulers believed that God had made their nation great and that they could do anything they wanted and God would make them even greater.

Ezekiel prophesied that Israel would be destroyed because of its arrogant corruption, and sure enough, Babylon invaded, destroyed the temple, scorched the earth and took much of the population captive.

Ezekiel said that God brings low the high tree and makes high the low tree. God would restore the way of justice and mercy so the nation would be a blessing and beloved community to all, and the weak and meek, the poor and lowly—the low tree—would be lifted high.

Today's gospel passage took place six hundred years later in Roman-occupied Israel where again the rich were getting richer while the poor were oppressed and the vulnerable neglected.

Jesus called people to shift their allegiance from the materialistic, hard-hearted realm of Caesar and Herod to the spiritual, merciful and loving realm of God. Jesus lifted the poor and the outcast. He healed the sick and lame. He restored people to sanity and serenity.

The problem was that in doing so, Jesus showed the corruption of the political and religious establishment, so the most powerful forces in his world aligned against him.

The Rev. William Barber is the co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign and founding director of the Center for Public Theology & Public Policy at Yale Divinity School. Barber wrote, "From Moses to Jesus, the Bible tells us that those who fought for justice...always found themselves hated, hounded, and heaped upon with false accusations... This lack of majority support is why the just must live by faith and must know exactly who we are."

We know who we are, don't we? For instance, we know the loving world that we long to see, and we know that the obstacles to that world are big and we are small.

But do we really know the full extent of our powers? Do we really know what a difference it could make if we dared to use our gifts as the Spirit asks? Do we really know what humanity could become?

Don't we live by faith no matter what? It is a matter of faith, not fact, to believe that we are too small and powerless and the forces against us too great.

The scriptures call us to believe that there is a power at work for love and life and light that is beyond our knowing or controlling. We see it in the seeds in our gardens. The scriptures tell us that we can work with that hidden power.

The righteous flourish like the palm tree,
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.
They are planted in the house of God...
In old age they still produce fruit;
they are always green and full of sap.

Look at these paintings done by Marcia Bushnell, think of all that Ken and Marcia gave in their old age. This sanctuary was like a great tree last Saturday, or a forest of trees that had grown from the seeds of love Ken and Marcia planted.

No one mentioned this and I don't think it is widely known, but Marcia had a map with pins that marked all the places in the world where people were suffering from oppression of some kind. She wept over each one, she raged, she felt the deepest longing to make a difference. She knew how small she was, but she did what she could. She raised an extraordinary family, she was active in this and other communities, and she brought forth paintings to move others to love and action—her fruits becoming seeds in us inspiring our own fruits.

The first Christian monks fled to the desert from a corrupt and violent society in the second and third centuries, just as ancient Chinese Taoist poets fled to the mountains from their corrupt empire. They shared the same wisdom, expressed by the saying of the desert fathers and mothers, “Go into your cell, and it will teach you everything.”

They knew themselves to be small and seemingly powerless, and they made themselves even smaller, confined in a simple monastic cell or mountain hut, and what it taught them was that the power of the Spirit or Tao was flowing through all things, including them. They produced teachings and poems and acts of compassion and justice that changed history and still inspire us today.

Jesus said that the realm of God “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.”

The film, *Freedom Song*, is a realistic fictional account of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC, coming to help local Black people desegregate a small town in Mississippi.

At the end, the main protagonist, a high school student named Owen, has been sentenced to four months in prison with other leaders for leaving school and marching to the city hall.

Owen is raging and despairing in their jail cell, shouting that the protests have led to nothing. Segregation has not budged. Daniel Wall, a character modeled on SNCC's Bob Moses, quietly says, "Read the paper tomorrow. A group in New Orleans heard about what you did and they are coming to town to pick up where you left off.... They saw your light."

He then explains that he joined SNCC and came to help their town because he saw the light of the first lunch counter sit-ins from a thousand miles away. "That light also inspired the first Freedom Riders, and they carried that flame all through the South until they were stopped. But not before you saw it. And it inspired you. So when you walked out of that school, you didn't just make a march. You picked up a torch. Now other folks have seen your light, and they are coming here to carry it on because you can't right now. And if they go to jail, too, other folks will pick up their torch and carry it someplace else. So, you're not on your own, Owen. You're part of something bigger than you. You're part of the movement."

That is the faith that the Psalmist and prophets and Jesus wanted us to have, and the truth they wanted us to see. Those of us who want to create God's realm on earth, who dedicate our lives to the cause of love and life and light, who want to bring down the high tree and lift the low tree—we are not alone. We're part of something bigger than us. We are part of the same movement that has existed from the dawn of time, the struggle for love and life and light of the very first living cell that is still in every one of the trillion cells in each of our bodies today.

We do not know what will come of the small seeds we sow, the smile, the helping hand, the meal for a sick neighbor, the song we sing in choir, the activism for a just cause, the time in silent prayer. We can only trust that the Spirit will move through these things in unforeseeable ways and they will bear fruit.

Jesus looked out at people like us, people with every right to feel discouraged, with every right to think that we are too small to make a difference. But Jesus said look, you are part of the movement, just plant your tiny seeds and watch what happens.

It does not matter how flawed or old or weak we are. All we need to do is sow our seeds. The Spirit will do the rest. Let us pray together in silence...

Haiku by Mel Goertz
A chipmunk sat beside me.
Together we gazed at
the blue mountains.