

June 13th, 2021

Year B; 3rd Pentecost

Ezekiel 17: 22-24

Psalm 92 1-4, 11-14

Mark 4: 26-34

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

Mark 4:26-34

Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It 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 shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples

Let me make very clear at the outset of this sermon, I have never been a regular reader of the Sports page of the newspaper. Tim reads newspapers online each day, but I still prefer to touch and grasp and fold my newspaper. So, when I pick up the Richmond Times Dispatch from our driveway in the morning, I might glance at the front of the Sports page as I put it in the recycling bin, but I never intentionally, sit down to read the Sports page.

Amazingly 2 of my best friends in the whole world are sports fanatics. Harold and Virginia Hallock, were my introduction to the Episcopal Church. Harold was the priest at Church of our Saviour, where I was baptized as an adult.

And Virginia, Harold's wife, taught me so much of the foundation of my faith, especially hearing how often Jesus calls on us to help and feed and comfort those in need.

Additionally, Virginia who unfailingly has dressed as the Easter Bunny every Easter I have known her, almost 40 years, well, she is the one who taught me to wear bunny ears on Easter morning!

Dressed as a white rabbit, she would silently, like a rabbit, move among the children at our Easter egg hunt, always held in the church's cemetery, offering treats to all from her basket, and helping the youngest children to find a beautiful egg, tucked behind a tombstone. I know no better image of resurrection.

But, we need to get back to the Sports page. Harold and Virginia are fanatical college sports fans, most especially, UVA sports fans, following basketball, football, baseball most closely.

When I first met them, they would invite me over to watch UVA football when they were in a bowl game, or UVA basketball during March Madness. Their home was a haven for me during difficult times; I belonged there and always felt welcome.

I loved visiting them and sharing in the excitement of whatever game was on the television. But, I did not have any interest in sports, so I would bring a magazine to read, and would yes, fall asleep and nap until the final seconds of the game, when Virginia would be standing and screaming in agony or joy, at the television.

So you might be surprised to hear that last week, as I was putting the Sports section in the recycling, a photo caught my eye and my curiosity, and I sat down to voluntarily read the Sports section.

The photo was of 2 runners, one slightly behind the other, both running with all their might. But what caught my eye was that the second runner was wearing what looked like a black sleep mask over his eyes. I then realized that the 2 runners were connected by a very short rope that they each

grasped, the first runner serving as guide to the second, who, in reading the article I learned, is blind.

The runner's name is Antoine Craig, he lives in Richmond, graduated from VCU, and this upcoming week will compete in the Paralympic team trials, in track and field, in Minneapolis, with hopes to go to the Paralympic Games in August in Tokyo.

Antoine began to lose his sight when he was 29 years old. After much searching for a diagnosis, he finally learned he has retinitis pigmentosa, a group of genetic disorders, that cause the retina to breakdown, leading to blindness.

Antoine described his emotions during this time as: "an imprecise emotion worse than fear gripped" him.

After diagnosis he did not know what to do next. He had always planned to work, not go on to college, but his loss of sight now limited those possibilities. As he struggled, a friend suggested he apply to VCU and he got in, finding a new path as a student and part of the college community.

Later another friend, knowing of his struggles with this still new life as a visually impaired man, this friend told Antoine that she had seen people running in pairs, one guiding the other, and asked if he wanted to try it at the VCU gym.

Antoine and his friend started running shoulder to shoulder on the upstairs track at the gym. Antoine found his emotions lifting, and feeling excited at the accomplishment of simply being able to run.

Antoine began to enter races, and when he clocked a 7:41 mile in his first race, he realized he had a gift for this sport. Thus putting him on the path to the Paralympics.

Antoine has now graduated from VCU with a degree in psychology and is working on his masters in psychology with plans to become a sports psychologist. He is aware that his own experiences as a athlete will help him understand, and better treat the stresses and pressures on athletes.

Antoine also describes, as part of his life in the VCU and running communities, getting what he calls “Antoine how” questions.

“Antoine how do you get dressed?”

“Antoine how do you get from place to place?”

“Antoine, how are you laughing?”

He works at answering all questions openly, helping to educate sighted folks, so they will better understand the life of someone visually impaired.

He went on to say he feels now a deep responsibility:

“I try to leave as much as I can for the next person who is coming up, who may have just lost their vision and don’t know what they are capable of, don’t know what’s possible for them.”

“I try to leave as much as I can for the next person who is coming up....”

Our gospel lesson today says that the kingdom of God is like tiny seeds, scattered on the ground, easy to overlook, so small, and yet able to grow and flourish, and to put out large branches that provide shade and safe space for the birds to nest.

The kingdom of God is right here, on earth, in our days, when we work to notice and offer those tiny seeds.

I was struck in Antoine’s story how small suggestions from friends grew into branches that provided shade.

“Antoine, maybe you should apply to VCU?”

“Antoine, did you know that there are runners at the Cary St gym, running in pairs, guides and visually impaired folks.”

“Antoine, I’ll run with you, if you want to try.”

And Antoine showed immense courage in noticing those tiny seeds offered, and trying activities, beyond his comfort with his blindness, to find hope and

growth.

So much so that now he is the one offering the seeds, being the vessel to bring the kingdom of God to earth, to folks he meets, to folks who follow after him with visual impairments who enter college or yearn to participate in a sport, or wonder about a career, or simply need to know they are not alone. Tiny seeds that plant hope, sometimes without our even knowing it.

For me Virginia and Harold did that in a dark time in my life.

“Megan, would you like to come over tonight and watch the UVA game? Bring your own magazine.”

We often think the “kingdom of heaven” is far off, pie in the sky, when we all get to heaven.....but our brother Jesus reminds us over and over the kingdom of God is right here, now, the moment we reach into each other’s darkness.....and offer those tiny seeds of hope.

Amen.