

The Realm of God is like a summer cold.

Sermon preached by the Rev. Edward M. Sunderland, Director of Crossroads Community Services, at the eight o'clock and nine o'clock services, July 24, 2011: The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost. Based on Romans 8:26-39, and Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52.

When I first started working with a Spanish language Episcopal Church in 1989 I struggled to find the right word to use when I was asking for volunteers. The word *voluntarios* sounded good but as a cognate it was automatically suspect. Cognates, although easier to use for the non-native speaker, do not always communicate as clearly in the target language. When I tried to use *voluntarios* although people seemed to understand they didn't use the word in the same way themselves. The word they used most frequently was the word *colaborador*. I liked the word *colaborador*. It allowed me to roll my r's and its English cognate, collaborator, sounded a little risky. The first definition of collaborator is one working with others toward a common goal such as when people work together on papers or art projects. The second definition is one working together with enemy occupiers against one's own country. This sense of collaborator described those who worked together with Nazis and other occupying powers in World War II.

The unsettling nature of this second definition is what attracted me and made me take notice. It called me up short and reminded me that although working with others toward a common goal is usually a good thing, one should not necessarily work with others toward every goal.

When Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven, God's imperial rule, to the yeast that the woman mixes into the wheat, it must have had the same type of effect on his hearers. Comparing God's realm to corrupting, unholy yeast used to leaven the dough must have called his hearers up short: It must have in some way reminded them that Jesus saw the work of God in all things. They were used to hearing religious leaders speak of the purity, the simplicity of unleavened bread; but Jesus talks about yeast which leavens the dough.

The same principle might apply to the mustard seed. Rather than compare God's realm to the mighty towering cedars of Lebanon Jesus compares it to a lowly garden shrub, a weed. The weed itself comes from the smallest of seeds. Again, when you are accustomed to hearing comparisons with great towering trees it must be unsettling to hear the kingdom of God compared to a lowly shrub, a weed which grows from the smallest of seeds.

And yet Jesus knew that if we are going to work with him for the establishment of God's realm we have to be prepared to be unsettled; we must be ready to give up familiar things if we are going to enter into the kingdom of God.

Now, I am not talking about the loss that we all suffer when life calls upon us to change.. Life has a way of unsettling us. Calling us up short. We experience loss, things change, people die of illness or at the hands of others and we are forced to change. Yesterday the death of singer Amy Winehouse and the all too predictable story of addiction, talent, and tragedy. On Friday the death of all those people in Norway and the all too predictable story of anti-immigrant bigotry, demented ideologues, and tragedy. The ongoing struggles of the Congress and the all too predictable story of health care and other public benefits delayed while those who lack nothing debate empty ideologies. We have familiar ways of dealing with these unsettling but all too predictable tragedies of life. When life itself calls us up short.

It is precisely these familiar ways of dealing with tragedy that Jesus wants to unsettle. Jesus' followers were used to hearing of religious people speaking of unleavened, not leavened bread, of the towering cedars of Lebanon, not weeds; and yet he compared the realm of God to the action of yeast in wheat and the weed in the garden. Religion for Jesus is not about purity and strength but baking bread and planting seeds. Baking bread and planting seeds are radical acts of hope at any time in human history but more so before modern advances in cooking technology and agriculture.

Yesterday the church received an email from a woman irate because of a particular odor outside of the 108 East 51st Street entrance. Our correspondent wondered how St. Bart's could possibly tolerate such conditions and threatened to report us to the city Department of Health. I did not respond defensively as I might have in yesterday's heat, and in fact I did not respond at all. I think her email may have been motivated by the heat and the pungent odors we smell in times of oppressive heat, when we all seem to become more irritable. If I do respond, I will invite the respondent to help us keep the place clean. Not just because it would be helpful—after all we are all St. Bart's—but also because I think that is what Jesus would do. We are all called to help out, to contribute, to collaborate.

Indeed Paul invites us to this type of radical hope. In the letter to the Romans he makes the claim that "all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose." The scholars of the Jesus Seminar have translated that same passage, "For those who love God, those who are called to live in accordance with God's purpose, God always collaborates for a good outcome."

God always collaborates for a good outcome. That is a statement of radical hope. Like all those who today celebrate the legalization of gay and lesbian marriages in the state of New York, we can affirm that it does get better. And that hope will spread. Like a summer cold spreads through the office, all will be infected, and all can become hopeful, and all can collaborate with God for a good outcome.

©2011 St. Bartholomew's Church in The City of New York.

*For information about St. Bartholomew's and its life of faith and mission at an important American crossroads, write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212/378-0222, or visit stbarts.org.
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022.*