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A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF JESUS: BRANCHES UPON BRANCHES

Mark 4:26-34

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Dr. Thomas E. Evans

Most of you know that I've spent the past few weeks touring some of the Great Cathedrals in Europe. One of the dangers of going away for two weeks and coming back late in the week is that Sunday rolls around awfully fast. So I wrote my sermon before I left, knowing that I would need to be prepared coming back. Of course, that has its own problems, the world goes on and if you have a copy of my sermon printed out, this is what you can do with it at this point (*rips sermon*).

While I was on this trip of cathedrals in Europe, the news continued, as it always does. But there was one particular story that just sunk a little bit deeper. It was Anthony Bourdain's suicide. I'm sure that many of you saw that news story.

Anthony Bourdain was somebody who was so incredibly fascinating and, in some ways, I think many of us perhaps envied his life – touring the world, trying some of those incredible foods. Just having the courage to put those things in your mouth was a little bit frightening to watch at times. And he had wealth, he had fame, he had respect – it seemed like he had everything that you could perhaps want. Yet, still, there was something obviously missing. As I read various articles about Anthony Bourdain, trying to make sense out of this, there was a theme that ran through several of these articles. It was a statement, not so much about Anthony Bourdain because nobody really knows why he did it, but it was more about the state of our society that our world is in.

It's broken – our culture is broken. These articles pointed to two things that are connected. One is the world is broken in terms of our connectedness with other people – with being a community that cares for and knows one another and experiences and shares their deepest pains and their greatest joys. But also it pointed to the fact that in this world we have forgotten about being

connected to a world and a purpose greater than ourselves – to the source of all things. As Christians we understand that as being connected to God.

In this world, all of us are striving for something. We are all working hard for something. Maybe we're striving for economic stability. Maybe we're striving to try to fix our broken relationships. Maybe we're striving to get our health back. It's different for many people. And as I was touring these cathedrals in Europe, I also noticed that they were striving for something as well. They were building these Cathedrals so incredibly high and so glorious, I think what they were striving for was heaven; they were trying to strive directly up to heaven. As I read through this gospel passage again, this section on Mark, I realized that Jesus was trying to teach us to strive for something different. He says, "Seek first the kingdom of God and all things will be added unto you." Seek first the kingdom of God. This is not the Kingdom of Heaven, it's even different from that. I think in seeking heaven, often times in Medieval Europe by building those tall cathedrals, they forgot about what was all around them. For the Kingdom of God is something that is here and now. It is something that's palpable, but it's hard to picture it. If I ask you to think about heaven, the first thing that pops into your mind is billowy clouds and angels with wings robed in white. We might have an easier time thinking of heaven as a feeling – a feeling of warmth, of being received and seeing your loved ones again that you have missed so terribly; a feeling of the warmth of the presence of God that radiates through your being. Perhaps the overriding feeling is one of glorious splendor that echoes throughout everything.

But that's not the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is not about a place that you go when you die. It is something that is about this

world, but Jesus knew that he couldn't just tell us what it was. He couldn't just explain it in simple words. That's because we've become blind to it. We can't see it or understand it any longer. So, Jesus sought to try to get at it in a different way – to come at it sideways – to help us understand the Kingdom of God. And to tap into our imagination, to tap into that part of us that still can see it and feel it and know it when we've got a hold of it. So Jesus uses poetry; he uses parables.

He uses these fantastic images. That the Kingdom of Heaven is like a pearl, a pearl of great and fantastic price that somebody would give up everything to have it. The Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast and the little bit leavens the whole loaf. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a net, it's like a king, it's like so many things. And, of course, the Kingdom of Heaven in today's passage, is like a mustard seed – the tiniest of things that grows into a great and fantastic bush.

We know the power of tiny things in today's world. Think about microprocessors. The average microprocessor can calculate about 2 billion times a second. That is absolutely mind-blowing. We can't even really conceive of what that is except to think that's really fast and a whole lot of calculations in just a second. A microprocessor can take a rocket to Mars – fantastic, unbelievable things.

But there is nothing that is quite so powerful as the smallest idea. The smallest idea that when it takes hold it can do great things. Let's build a railroad that crosses the country. Let's build a skyscraper that scrapes against the sky. Or let's found a country, and this sounds radical, a country that is based on freedom and equality and opportunity for everyone. We know the power and impact that these ideas have had on history, but there is no idea that is so powerful and so potent as the simplest idea of the Kingdom of God. A land where God rules perfectly in our hearts. A land in which there is no more enmity amongst races or cultures, a land in which God's justice is perfectly executed, a land in which everybody has an

abundance to eat, enough healthcare, and freedom and love for all.

A simple idea, but one that is very hard to get to. It's an idea, in fact, that requires death. It requires a death of our old selves; those things we grasp and we cling to. It requires a death of the way in which this world operates; the way in which decisions are made; the way in which power is wielded. It requires a death of the old self and the old world and a birth into a new one. But like that seed that goes in and, as the Bible describes, dies, after that death takes place then it requires change – dramatic change.

Everybody here this morning wouldn't be here if you hadn't already gone through mind-bending, stupefying change. Think about it for a moment. Some centuries ago there were many crazy notions floating around about how human beings came about. One of the ideas that floated around was that the woman's egg was just a tiny little person. It was a tiny little person, with tiny arms and tiny legs and even tinier little toes. Then we got microscopes and we could look at and see it's only a simple cell. The man's joins with the woman's and suddenly these two simple, undifferentiated cells come together and they divide again and again and again and they grow and differentiate. And these two simple cells, divided so many times, billions of times, that you're here today, sitting in these pews, because of all that change you went through already.

But Jesus tells us that there is an even greater change that we must go through in order to perceive and know the Kingdom of God. It's not a physical change, but it's a change within – a change of our heart and a change of our soul.

Jesus knew that just telling people to change doesn't work. Thus we have these bizarre metaphors that I was talking about – a metaphor evocative of a king, of a pearl, of yeast, of a net, and of that mustard seed. And we know that that mustard seed is not just a tiny, preformed mustard bush, but the potential of it. And that Kingdom of

God, that seed of that idea, has got to be planted in your heart. Once it does it grows and it grows and it grows and it will never let go and you will never give it up. It must grow inside of us – but not all straight and orderly. Jesus didn't say the Kingdom of Heaven is like a cedar tree that goes strong and tall and straight. No, it's a bush. And just by looking at that mustard seed, you could never possibly predict which branch is going to grow which way and in what direction – it is unpredictable. In fact, to try to control it, to try to guide and veer and steer this Kingdom of God within your heart and within other people's hearts, is to kill it. That's what happened with the Spanish Inquisition. They tried to reign it in and define it and control how the Kingdom of God was going to grow in people's hearts. That is not our job. This is what Jesus tells us: "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." (Mark 4:26-27)

This seed is not going to grow in our hearts or in other hearts by Purity Laws. It's not going to happen through Moral Codes. It's not going to happen and grow through wealth, through fame, or through grasping of things of this world. Anthony Bourdain was an amazing person. But whatever he was grasping for, it wasn't filling that hole in his heart.

The Kingdom of Heaven doesn't grow in a well-manicured fashion. It grows wildly and in crazy directions. For years, in my lawn, every spring the dreaded clovers pop up. You look at those clovers and you just get frustrated and wonder how to get rid of these things. You try something and the next season they come back up again. Yet I experienced those clovers differently this year. As I looked at a whole lawn burst forth with them, I thought how beautiful, how wonderful are these clovers. That's what the kingdom of God is. It is clumps of flowers growing up in random and crazy places.

I wonder, if Jesus were to tell parables of the Kingdom of God today (this is a bit presumptuous on my part), I wonder if he would have said the

Kingdom of God is like a "trash panda". A raccoon, that one day is seen on the side of a 25-story building, that captures the imagination of a country as they watched this critter scaled the heights. Maybe you saw that story on the news this week. In St Paul, Minnesota, on the UBS building, some people were trying to help this raccoon down from the first or second floor and, as they did so, it started scurrying up. It was a terrifying thing to watch. People were riveted. As they got off work, they went outside and they watched the racoon. They were praying for it, they were gasping, the news was covering it, and you could see this racoon climb up. Suddenly, this animal – that you shoo away when it goes after your garbage cans – this "trash panda" that when you see it, you try to stay away from it because you don't know if it's got rabies, you don't know if it's got some vermin that it's going to spread to you – suddenly, people's hearts are going out to this creature. It was so incredible to see. It would climb a few stories with his little paws and little claws right up the side of the building and, when it would get tired, it would park itself in a window sill and take a nap. Some people in that building took pictures of this little raccoon. And it just looked so pathetic; it looked so tired; it looked so worn out. There was no way that little raccoon was going to get out of this thing alive. People's hearts went out and they watched it late into the night. They finally turned their TVs off and woke up the next morning wondering what happened to this raccoon. Did it make it? Did it get to the top? Well, it turns out that there was a night camera on that building. When people got up in the morning, they saw this little raccoon climbing up the very last floor of the 25-story building climb – over the top and make it to safety. Finally, the racoon was captured and let out in the wild.

The Kingdom of God is people caring – with everything they've got – about what some see as the most insignificant and unimportant little creature. Let's let that seed of the Kingdom of God grow in our hearts. And let's have that same passion and that love in the name of Jesus, for the lost and the forgotten of this world. Amen.