

Trust in the Way of Love  
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*With what can we compare the kingdom of God . . . 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.*

In today's gospel Jesus gives us one of the most powerful images of the kingdom of God, perhaps the most well-known and loved of images, the tiny mustard seed growing into the greatest of all shrubs. I imagine that some of you, like me, have accompanied children in Godly Play or Catechesis of the Good Shepherd and may recall holding the tiny mustard seed or watching the children carefully turn the seed in their hands.

During the long months of the pandemic, I found myself yearning to return to those Sunday school classrooms where we explored the parables with our hands. I

yearned to touch the tiny mustard seed, to prepare the yeast and the flour, to watch the children gently and reverently handle the small pearl during their dedicated time in the atrium. During our time away from church, those precious moments of wonder became so distant; I must admit that at times the kingdom of God felt very far off. Of course I know in my heart that the kingdom of God is not distant, as your former bishop Porter Taylor (who is now the assisting bishop in my diocese) reminded us repeatedly throughout the pandemic, “the gate of heaven is wherever you are.” Bishop Taylor is right, the gate to the Kingdom is wherever we are, and as Jesus demonstrates in the parable of the mustard seed, the kingdom manifests as we sow it, as we scatter the seeds and then give them our trust. Like the sower, we don’t know how the scattered seeds grow; we simply trust that they will.

For the last fifteen months I have thought a lot about the kingdom of God as the way of love. In all that we faced, I found myself struggling to move forward in hope if I did not trust in the way of love. Amidst the anger and frustration of political polarization and fearful uncertainty, I have had to stop myself and remember to begin again from a place of love. This beginning again from love is a practice, and one that is often three steps forward, two steps back. All we have to do is turn on the television and we face the risk of getting swept out of love very

quickly. Betrayal and cynicism are on the rise in our culture, and this is particularly affecting the young. As a school chaplain, I have listened to many young people express a deep despair and a growing doubt in the power of love. In her enlightening book, *all about love*, bell hooks says that:

“When [she] travels around the nation giving lectures about ending racism and sexism, audiences, especially young listeners, become agitated when [she] speaks about the place of love in any movement for social justice. Indeed, all the great movements for social justice in our society have strongly emphasized a love ethic. Yet young listeners remain reluctant to embrace the idea of love as a transformative force.”

Bell hooks cites cynicism and fear as the great barriers to love. It is cynicism and fear that pull us away from the kingdom of God, away from the way of love. She goes on to say that “being part of a loving community does not mean we will not face conflicts, betrayals, negative outcomes from positive actions, or bad things happening to good people. Love allows us to confront these negative realities in a manner that is life-affirming and life-enhancing.”

So the question we all must ask ourselves as we walk this journey of love, as we venture towards the kingdom of God, is how do we overcome the cynicism and the fear that continue to creep onto our paths, especially as they affect our children so profoundly? How do we not, in the words of the late John Lewis, “get lost in a sea of despair?” How do we guide our youth to trust in the way of love?

In answering this question I would like to offer a story.

A couple of years ago I was serving at St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church in Richmond, and our family ministry team led a youth mission trip in our city. Rather than travel to a distant place outside of our Richmond community, we put together a program based on the principles of “becoming beloved community” to study the history of our city of Richmond and the need for continued work in healing and reconciliation. We stayed overnight at a Christian intentional community and

retreat center in the heart of the city called Richmond Hill and gathered for daily worship before and after learning and working primarily in the East End of the city, the part of Richmond that has faced economic instability, exploitation and neglect since the beginning of redlining in the 1930s. One of the highlights of our time together was under the leadership of Rev. Tee Turner, a retired African-American Baptist pastor who had served the East End throughout his ministry. Rev. Turner led us along the slave trail beside the James River, and we began our journey at the foot of a Confederate monument dedicated to soldiers and sailors who died in the Civil War. In a profound opening talk about the history of enslaved people in our city of Richmond, Rev. Turner shared his experience with the statue overlooking the James River. He told us about a transformational moment in his life when he found himself looking at that statue and feeling the intense pain and anger that he as an African-American had

suffered. And then he said that he was suddenly overcome with a grief that arose from a very different perspective. He realized that this statue represented not just Confederate soldiers who had fought and died, but loved ones lost: family: brothers, fathers, sons, and husbands. Rev. Turner said that the Confederates "built that monument out of grief, and they need to be healed as well." Walking the way of love, Rev. Turner was able to hold pain and anger in one hand and grief and forgiveness in the other. His story prepared our hearts for the work to be done, and on our way back to our retreat center at the end of that day, one of the high school boys said to me, "I think that I have learned more in this one day than I did all year in school."

Because what we had learned was more than facts and historical accounts; we had learned how to hold space for hurt, pain, and betrayal, as well as grief for those who caused hurt, and forgiveness for those who left extensive damage and wounds that still need healing.

We learned what bell hooks wrote in her book: “Love allows us to confront these negative realities in a manner that is life-affirming and life-enhancing.”

We, and the generations that follow, must embrace this way of love, this doorway into the kingdom of God, what Jesus describes when he speaks of sowing the mustard seed: sowing as trusting in the power of love in which we are open to another way of seeing the person standing across from us, the person turning away in disagreement, and yes, even the person who has betrayed us. Because if we sow the seeds of love and trust in their power, they will indeed grow like the mustard seed into the greatest of shrubs and make a kingdom of heaven for us all. There is much work to be done; may we have the courage and the trust to do this kingdom work from a place of love. Amen.