



COMMUNITY OF HOPE

Well hasn't this year been momentous! Enormous bushfires, floods, hail storms, drought, and now a global pandemic and a likely deep economic recession. There are plenty of reasons to give away the idea that God is with us, that there is hope at all, that there will be an end to this suffering. And yet, we gather and reflect, albeit it a little differently than we've done in the past, and we seek solace with our community and the Spirit of God.

For the next little while, the way we practice our discipleship will change. This will test us as a people. When many of our congregations are already pushed to the limit of our resources, now is when we need to discover how to be the church in an era without buildings. A few weeks ago it was a conceptual thought and for a future generation, and yet now, it is us, it is here, and it is real.

I want to acknowledge that this isn't easy. It doesn't allow for those without computers or the Internet to participate as freely. But, right now we need to focus on remaining connected and sharing together in the light of God which gives us hope. Over the coming weeks, we'll get better at this. I promise.

The whole fourth chapter of Mark is dedicated to three principles. Growing seeds, leadership and having faith. The first parable is about spreading seed in all the places. Everywhere. You won't grow plants everywhere, but it's important to put the seeds of hope in every place you go. Some will hear it and grow, others will trample it. The next is about putting your lamp on a stand, not under the bed. This is about honesty, truth and being an example for others. Not hiding things out of fear or anxiety, but sharing them with the world, including your light. The next few parables are also about seeds. The growing seed parable is simply about letting the seed to its own work. It knows what to do, it has this innate ability to just grow and turn into something. The next is the parable of the mustard seed – which represents the idea that the kingdom of God is like a tiny seed, when planted it becomes the largest of trees. Or as I often describe it, the simple thought that God's love and grace is for everyone, and when we take on that truth in our hearts, our lives are opened up to all sorts of possibilities. And finally, the last parable in the 4th chapter is when the disciples and Jesus are in a boat. There is a storm. Jesus is asleep and the disciples wake him up in fear of drowning, to which he says 'quiet, be still'. Now it says he rebuked the wind and the waves with those words, but I wonder whether the author here was attempting to protect the ego of the disciples, and really, Jesus is telling them to be quiet, to be still. Indeed, there is a storm in our lives right now, and I feel God is calling us to be quiet, be still, know that we are surrounded by God's grace.

This chapter has a rhythm. Plant seeds, let them grow, have the faith that they will grow, and while we're doing that, be still. Even when we're frustrated about why that seed which fell on deaf ears isn't growing, not to worry. Even when

the weeds strangle the message of hope, have faith that we will overcome. Even when the whole world around us is throwing waves and wind and chaos into our lives, when we feel like the most vulnerable of things in a large ocean in a little boat, the message is clear. Be still. Quiet. Listen. Have faith. Do not be afraid.

During this chaotic time, the call of the Gospels and our history is to remain faithful to the notion that God is with us, and that we must lead in the way of peace. We must take care of those among us who are vulnerable and afraid, and we must speak out for justice.

It is our duty right now as disciples to lead by example. And that means, to stay at home. To wash our hands. To listen to experts and not our social media or other bias commentary sources. To offer compassion and understanding and love and help to all of those around us. My friends, social distancing is not disconnecting us, it is connecting us to a greater understanding of what it means to be a community. By staying away from others, you're participating in an act of social justice! For whatever you do for those in our society who are immunocompromised, who are sick, who are aged, you do for God. Yes, it's painful. Yes, it's frustrating. Yes, your business, your workplace, your retirement savings, your gym subscription, your sports team will all be affected. Yes, with a heart full of justice and a mind full of intention, you will be an instrument of peace if you have the courage.

Now is the time for us to join together in acts of justice. Our hope lies in the promise that no matter the size of the mountain, no matter the challenge, no matter the time it will take, we will come out of the wilderness as God is with us. Our hope lies in our deep relationship with one another. Let us use that hope! Let us put our lamp on a stand and share with the world that we must not think of ourselves in this moment, but we can literally save lives by being a disciple. We can spread the seeds of hope in all directions, and it is our call to do that regardless of who is listening.

In Romans, we read:

"Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

...neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:35, 38 NRSV).

May we remember, it is up to us. It is you. It is me. And together, with faith, we will create communities filled with hope. Amen.

Ben Smith

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