

Mark 4: 26-34

2 Corinthians 5:14-18

SEEING THINGS DIFFERENTLY

I want to begin by telling two stories. In the 1930s' there was a man in Chicago who called himself a "businessman," but most of the people knew him as a gangster – as "Public Enemy No. 1" – a man named Al Capone. He virtually controlled Chicago for an entire decade; he was involved in everything from buying off government officials to running bootlegged liquor to gambling to prostitution to racketeering to murder.

Al Capone employed a very good lawyer – a man named "Easy Eddie" – who managed to keep Capone out of jail for a long time, in spite of massive efforts to bring Capone to justice. And, because Eddie was such a good lawyer, Capone paid him well – well enough that he could afford a huge mansion that occupied an entire city block, filled with every convenience and a full-time staff. Eddie apparently enjoyed his high-living lifestyle, and for a long time didn't seem to give a second thought to the corruption and evil he was helping to support.

He had a wife he loved and one son whom he adored. Nothing was too good for his boy, and Eddie saw to it that he had the best of everything: clothes, toys, education, and a car, as he got older. Despite his own career path, Eddie did his best to teach his son right from wrong. He wanted his boy to be a better man than he knew himself to be. Yet, with all of his wealth and power, there were two things he couldn't give his son: a good name, and a good example of real honesty and real integrity. So one day, Eddie made a very difficult decision. He decided to rectify the wrongs he had done, as well as he could, by going to the authorities and agreeing to testify against Capone. When he did, his testimony was a key piece of evidence that finally sent Al Capone to prison.

Eddie's decision came with a very high price. Capone had no mercy on anyone he believed had been disloyal to him, and only a couple of months after Eddie's testimony against Capone, Eddie died in a blaze of gunfire on a lonely Chicago Street.

The second story takes place in the South Pacific during World War II. Stationed there on an aircraft carrier called the *Lexington* was a young Lieutenant Commander named Butch O'Hare, who was a fighter pilot. One day, O'Hare's squadron was sent on a mission. En route, O'Hare checked his fuel gauge and realized that someone had forgotten to top off his fuel tank. Since he didn't have enough fuel to complete the mission and make it back to the ship, his squadron leader told him to return to the ship immediately. Reluctantly, he dropped out of formation and headed back to the fleet.

As he was returning to the *Lexington*, O'Hare saw in the distance a squadron of Japanese aircraft coming toward the American fleet. Butch flew straight into the formation of Japanese planes, firing his wing-mounted 50-caliber guns, damaging as many of the Japanese planes as possible until all his ammunition was spent. Even then, he continued his attack, diving at the other planes, hoping to clip a wing or tail, in order to damage their ability to fly, and actually downing five enemy aircraft. Finally and somewhat surprisingly, the Japanese fighters took off in another direction. O'Hare and his tattered fighter made it back to the *Lexington*.

For his act of heroism, President Roosevelt invited Butch O'Hare to the White House, where he received the Congressional Medal of Honor, the first Naval Aviator to

do so. One year later, Butch was killed in aerial combat, at the age of 29. His hometown, Chicago, honored him by naming their airport after him. The next time you fly through O'Hare, you might stop between Terminals 1 & 2 and see Butch's memorial and his Medal of Honor. And you might reflect on the fact that Butch O'Hare was Easy Eddie's son. (Sharyl B. Peterson, *Lectionary Homiletics*, June 2006, pp. 30-31)

Those two stories help to introduce the sermon by saying that things aren't always what they seem, and, we are reminded of just how important it is to go beyond first impressions in order to see things differently. Easy Eddie was more than a "slick" lawyer, who made it possible for Al Capone to avoid justice; Eddie's love for his son enabled him ultimately to do what was right – even if it meant setting matters straight at the expense of his own life. And, Butch O'Hare was so much more than just a pampered rich kid; he learned his lessons well from his father Eddie – he put the welfare of others before his own and eventually sacrificed his life for the sake of others.

In the two parables concerning seeds, Jesus teaches his disciples - then and now – to see things differently. In teaching his disciples about the kingdom of God, Jesus tells us that we are not in control; it is God's kingdom, God's world, God's church, and God is in control. Certainly, we are called to do our part; in the first parable, the sower scatters the seed on the ground; and then, when the grain is ripe, the sower gathers in the harvest. In between time, the sower sleeps and rises, day after day, but he does not know how it is that the seed sprouts and grows. God understands what we do not, and God directs the unknown to do God's bidding and accomplish God's purposes in the world. We do what we can and then wait and trust God to do the rest.

Likewise, in the second parable of the mustard seed, we are reminded that things aren't always what they seem. Just because a mustard seed is small is no reason to discount its potential. Here again, with God all things are possible, and thus, it is necessary to see things differently. A small mustard seed can and will grow into a great shrub with large branches that attract and provide for many birds. To be sure, God's grace is life-giving and God's power will eventually and always triumph over any and all setbacks and obstacles.

From all appearances, God's kingdom is hidden in a small child born of a simple woman named Mary, an itinerant rabbi and healer who was rejected by his people and abandoned by almost all of his disciples. And yet, this very same person was revealed as the Son of God, the crucified One, the Lord of life and Lord over death. And, even though his disciples were a small, ragtag group of frightened followers, empowered by the gift of God's Spirit at Pentecost, they rose up, shook off their fear, and proclaimed both Jesus' death for the sake of sinners and his triumphant victory over the grave. Now, we see things differently than before when we tended to judge a book by its cover!

In the epistle lesson (from 2 Cor. 5) for today, that's precisely what the Apostle Paul was saying to the church at Corinth. In the beginning, Paul (formerly known as Saul) looked upon Jesus as a mere man. Perhaps he saw this Jesus as a great teacher or a fine moral example, but he also viewed him as a rabble rouser, who stirred up people and didn't always follow the Law to perfection. But now, Paul saw things differently! Paul affirmed Jesus as the Christ, his Lord and Savior. That being the case, the world is no longer "the same old, same old." No, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! Faith in the crucified and risen Christ allows us to see things differently - from God's point of view!

When I was almost twelve years old, I was confirmed and joined the church upon my profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. I was as sincere about what I believed as I knew how to be. A few years later, I began to seriously discern God's call and claim upon me to become a minister. I was not a perfect person but I really did try to be a good person for the most part. I got along well with my family and friends, and I was courteous toward others but I was also aware of my deficiencies. Sometime later, I was sitting in church on a Sunday morning, as was my custom. Our congregation had just prayed together the unison Prayer of Confession and the minister, Dr. Howard Walton, responded with the same Declaration of Pardon that he used week after week: "Hear the good news of the Gospel. If anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation; the old is finished and gone; everything has become fresh and new." Nothing was different, except me! For the very first time in my life, I heard the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ not just with my ears but also with my heart! And I knew, without a doubt, that that Good News was meant for me as well. I really and truly was forgiven. I also became convinced that my calling as a minister was to help all people hear that that good news is meant for them as well. What a joy it is to see things differently – not from a perspective of guilt but one of grace!

We are called to see things differently and then, while God is in control and is working the divine purposes out, at the same time, we are empowered by the Spirit to do our part. We are called to go to work and do what we can in partnership with God. Once again, in the epistle lesson for today, the Apostle Paul states, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, *and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.*"

Here's how Dr. Eugene H. Peterson translates that passage: "God put the world square with himself through the Messiah, giving the world a fresh start by offering forgiveness of sins. God has given us the task of telling everyone what he is doing. We're Christ's representatives. God uses us to persuade men and women to drop their differences and enter into God's work of making things right between them."

What a blessing it must be to God to see people change from what they use to think was so important that it kept them apart from others to seeing things differently and coming together. A number of years ago, Ken Burns did a series on the Civil War for public television. There were a number of scenes of the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg in 1913. A group of old Confederate and Union veterans returned to commemorate the occasion. Old films show the men talking over old times, swapping stories and eating together. Then there was a re-enactment of Pickett's Charge. The old Union soldiers took their places, as they had fifty years earlier, among the rocks on Seminary Ridge. The old Confederate soldiers took their places on the farmland below. After a while the Confederates started to move forward across the broad, flat field where just fifty years before many had died. "We could not see rifles and bayonets," an eyewitness said, "but canes and crutches" as they made their slow advance toward the ridge with the more able-bodied ones helping the disabled ones. As the Confederate troops got near the Union line, they broke into one long, defiant rebel yell.

Then something quite remarkable happened. Unable to restrain themselves any longer, the Yankees burst from behind the stone wall and flung themselves upon their former enemies. Only this time, fifty years later, they did not do battle with them. Instead they threw their arms around them. Some in blue, some in gray, and the old men embraced one another and wept. What a difference fifty years made. In that moment

they understood that they were created not to do battle with one another but to love each other. (Copied)

It took fifty years but, ultimately, those men on both sides of the Civil War saw things differently. And when hugs replaced hatred, the very kingdom of God drew nearer and became real. May we take seriously the fact that our sins are forgiven, that we have been reconciled to God, and that we have been given the ministry of reconciliation to share with others. When we see all others differently, from God's perspective, then there is hope for reconciliation. And, peace will spread forth its branches and embrace us all, and we can rest together and find refreshment and community in its shade. Thank God for the mysterious power and possibility of the Kingdom of God growing in our midst and growing within each of us. Thank God that we can do our part and thus give glory to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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