

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Rev. Donald DiXon Williams

RCL: Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
LM: Wisdom 12:13, 16-19; Psalm 86:5-6, 9-10, 15-16; Romans 8:26-27; Matthew 13:24-43 or
13:24-30

It is a good and wise thing to ask yourself the following questions from time to time: What do I do? When do I do what I do? Where do I do what I do? How do I do what I do? Who is with me when I do what I do? And last but not least, why do I do what I do? In other words, eventually we must ask, What is my motive?

I cannot speak for you but I can speak for me, so I'll bare just a little bit of my soul. There have been times in my life when I have done the right thing for the right reasons, done the wrong thing for the wrong reasons, done the wrong thing for the right reasons, and done the right thing for the wrong reasons.

I suspect that when it comes to personal or political things, other people could say exactly what I've said. Every day advocates and legislators for social change must struggle with the right and wrong of issues as well as the motives behind the struggle. Politics can have a funny way of messing with one's motives. Many decent people start down the political road with good intentions, only to find out later the unexpected place to which a well-paved road can sometimes lead. Yet one's motives also can have a positive way of mediating one's politics.

Psalm 139 is a beautiful and powerful reminder that what we do, when we do, where we do, how we do, who we do, and why we do are monitored by the omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient God. I find it reassuring that through the messiness of the politics of war and peace; injustice and justice; poverty and wealth; racism, sexism, and classism; bad legislation and good legislation, God sees and knows every word and motive of every participant. We can have confidence that even in the hellishness of our personal, national, and international situations, God is somewhere above and within it all.

I like the imagery in Jacob's dream at Bethel in Genesis 28. A traffic jam of angels ascends and descends the ladder. God knows the who, what, when, where, how, and why of every angel on the ladder. This is good news for me because it frees me from worrying about others. I can concentrate on my own motives and say with the psalmist, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (vv. 23-24). That is good advice personally, professionally, and politically.

For as long as I can remember, I have heard about mustard seeds. (Today the verses from Matthew that mention them are in the Lectionary for Mass readings and next week are in the Revised Common Lectionary readings.) I first found out about mustard seeds as a youngster in Sunday school, and I've heard more than my fair share of sermons over the years about having the faith of a grain of a mustard seed. However, I did not have my first direct experience with a

mustard seed until 1998. Seeing and feeling it, rolling it between my thumb and finger, was fascinating. It was like meeting a biblical character in the flesh or perhaps meeting a long-lost relative for the first time. And the seeds are very small, just the way the Bible describes them.

The passage from Matthew 13 reminds me that many good things and ideas start out small. One such idea was the campaign called “Africa: Seeds of Hope” that Bread for the World sponsored as its Offering of Letters focus in 1998. The goal was to help small-scale farmers and rural communities in Africa by redirecting some of our nation’s foreign aid resources. This would allow more African farmers (many of whom are women) to have the seeds, tools, small loans, and other things they need to help feed themselves and their families. Just like the tiny mustard seed, a small group of grassroots Bread for the World members started writing letters, making phone calls, and visiting their members of Congress. What started out as something small ended with President Bill Clinton signing the Africa: Seeds of Hope Act into law.

There is a great song entitled “Ordinary People” I heard sung by Danniebelle Hall that says God uses ordinary people to do as God commands. The song’s last line reminds us that when we put things in the Master’s hands, God can make a little into a whole lot more. Truer words were never spoken.

Children’s Time [LH]

Either this week or next, when you choose to use the mustard seed passage in Matthew, find some small seeds (ideally mustard seeds) and pass them out to the children. Tell the Bible story, focusing on how even small seeds can grow into larger plants and provide fruit, just as we can grow in our faith. Each of the children will get bigger as their bodies grow from the size they were as babies to adulthood; our prayer is that their faith will grow, too, as they trust and love God and love each other. You or your church’s children’s music coordinator could lead them in singing “We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder,” which offers a chance to sing and move around. While the theology of that image can be rather deep, it does show God’s presence with us and care for us even in the hardest times of our lives.

Musical Suggestions

Lord, How Can We Feed a Hungry World? (Mustard Seed Faith)— BP 156

The Angels Keep A-Watchin’—AAH 130

We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder—AAH 464

Order My Steps—AAH 333