

July 30, 2023
Proper 12A
by The Rev. Deacon Alberta Brown Buller
The Episcopal Church of the Holy Apostles, Hilo, Hawaii

Welcome to Jesus University!

Loving God, May we carry Your Gospel with us, planting seeds of faith each time we exit these doors. May our upcoming week, be filled with the gift that Your grace gives us today. Amen.

Good morning. When I was first ordained, in the Diocese of California, I served at a little church in Marin County called St. Francis with an interim priest named Kathy Crary. She was a lot of fun to be around and had a great sense of humor. In fact, you may have met Tony and Patricia Mei who visited here, last month, as they do most summers. They are members of that church and had dinner at our house a few weeks ago.

Well, when this long season of Ordinary time would begin, the time when we wear green vestments and have green altar coverings for months, and we hear Jesus's parables and teachings, Kathy would sometimes begin her sermons with: "Welcome, to Jesus University."

This season is truly a time to sit with the readings, to open our hearts and receive what the spirit is saying to us. What is there for us to learn and carry with us and use in our daily lives? In this journey, called life?

Today is no exception. Let's take a look at the Genesis reading. We have Jacob. Remember a little farther back? With help from his mother, Rebekah, he was able to trick his father, Isaac, into giving him his brother Esau's blessing. This was something quite sacred and you can imagine Esau didn't appreciate this. So, he plotted to kill his brother. Their mother sent Jacob off on a journey to her brother's home for safety. There he falls in love with Rachel, his cousin. His uncle says he can marry her after 7 years of hard work on the farm. The day of the wedding arrives. Now he's the one who is tricked, by his uncle/father in law, into marrying his other cousin Leah.

We never hear how the women feel about all this but no matter, in the end, after 14 years or so of hard labor, Jacob ends up with not one, but two cousin/wives. Eventually he will have two addition wives for a total of four. What a family. What a tale of twists and turns. But, from this perfectly, imperfect family, a Savior is born.

We humans with our limited capacity are rarely able to see the entire picture. In our journey called life, there are many twists and turns.

The benefit of being a person of faith for a period of time is that you can look back and often see God's hand in your life on that journey; maybe in the odd place you ended up in and loving or that person you met out of the blue who completely changed your life.

Jesus seemed to love to take us on journeys with twists and turns through parables and today he gives us 5! All of this would have been a little confusing to the larger audience and then his disciples later. But when you attend Jesus University the most important thing to remember, I think, are the words of Presiding Bishop Michael Curry: "Jesus came to turn the world upside down, which is actually, right side up."

Walking the earth during a time of great oppression and strife, Jesus spoke out and stood up for people with the boot of hate and tyranny pressed firmly against their necks.

Today he might say:

The kingdom of heaven is like a person who wakes up in the morning knowing there will never be another mass shooting in this country.

The kingdom of heaven is like living in a country where every person has the right to quality education and quality healthcare no matter their income or where they live.
The kingdom of heaven is like the fulfillment of needs for all.
The kingdom of heaven is a place where mercy, justice, forgiveness and equality abound for everyone.
The kingdom of heaven is heaven is like...

Well, you fill in the blank. We can't fix it all by ourselves. There is just too much to be done and I think that's the lesson we hear when Jesus speaks of the mustard seed. We start with small bits but each one matters.

Years ago, on a trip to Eureka, California, I met a remarkable woman, named Bettye Kwan Chinn.

When Bettye was just seven years old, her wealthy, western-educated family was persecuted during Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution and forced from their home. With her mother jailed and her siblings taken to labor camps, little Bettye was left homeless, and forced to wear a sign that read "child of the devil."

Once she was forced to kneel in broken glass and beaten just because she'd peeked through the window of a grade school classroom. She endured a campaign of torture and ostracism for four years. Bettye was so horribly treated that she stopped speaking, for years. She and three siblings fled the city on foot, hiked hundreds of miles and swam across the Pearl River Delta to freedom in Hong Kong, where she relearned how to talk.

Eventually she made her way to northern California. Once here, she eventually married Leung Chinn, a physics professor at what was then Humboldt State University, and moved to Eureka. They had a son. When Bettye noticed one of her sons' classmates was hungry, she began providing that little girl with lunch along with her son. When she found out that her family was living out of a car, she began bringing them dinner and her outreach efforts began. She quickly went from feeding one girl to one family, then two, then dozens, and would then spend decades quietly feeding and caring for Humboldt County's most destitute residents.

In time, people took notice, which enabled her to do more. She used a grant that came as a part of then California First Lady Maria Shriver's Minerva Award to build a public shower facility at St. Vincent de Paul, believing everyone deserves the dignity that comes with being clean, and later the notoriety that came with winning the Presidential Citizen's Medal — the second highest civilian honor in the country — from President Barack Obama, to forming a nonprofit, which has gone on to open a homeless day center, a family shelter and multiple transitional housing projects, using shipping containers.

Bettye had this to say, "The reason I am motivated to help those in need is because of my experiences with hunger and homelessness when I was a child. I lived in China during a time of political unrest and lived in asylum during cultural reparations. I was separated from my family and homeless between the ages of 7 and 11. During that time I was starving, afraid and alone. I remember being so hungry and desperate that I would lick the salt off my clothing in the summertime. I witnessed human indifference and great human cruelty. I know what it is like to starve, feel hopeless and not know if I will live or die. These experiences are a fundamental part of who I am today and are the root of my commitment to those in need. "

We are called to be the ones to do the work for God outside these doors. When we plant tiny seeds of goodness and hope they bloom into the visible signs of God's presence in the world.

This is the yeast that works invisibly in the dough. It may take faith to believe the bread will rise but faith is also needed to bring the kingdom alive in our everyday lives.

The treasure in the field reminds us, the Kingdom of heaven is found all around us, in the most ordinary of places.

So, cast your nets wide. Although the Kingdom of heaven is all available to all.

The path is not always clear. We don't know where life's journey will lead us.

How could a starving, horribly abused 7 year old, from China, enter a journey that would lead her to be honored at the Vatican and meet the Pope? To be honored at the White House and meet President Obama?

When I met her, she told me that a nice little Irish man that goes by one name, who is in a band, had been by her office. But she can never remember his name. Bono from U-2? Yes, that's it, she said, Bono.

In her office, I noticed a beautiful set of sanctus bells, similar to the ones we ring during communion. I admired them and told her how exquisite I thought they were.

She told me when she was at the Vatican, meeting the Pope, she too had admired them. A few weeks later, they arrived in the mail, a gift from Pope Francis.

A journey leads a child who'd been horribly terrorized and brutalized beyond imagination to this country and a life of service to others. A journey takes a young man in search of a wife that leads to the savior of the world eventually being born.

Each day, we have no idea where our journey will take us. None of us has the big picture. We can only live moment by moment. But what we can do is find those tiny mustard seeds, those tiny ways to bring the Kingdom of Heaven ever nearer to us and those we encounter along the way.

So, Welcome to Jesus University. Amen.