

Undercover But Not a Mole Acts 2:1-8, 12-17
Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV – Pentecost Sunday (June 12) 2011

Oh my! did we hear some Pentecostal teaching and preaching at Annual Conference this year.

We heard a two hour teaching session about the prediction of Pentecost, from the Ascension text in Acts, chapter 1, where Jesus (immediately prior to his being taken up into heaven) said: **“...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”**

And, in our final worship, we heard a fiery, excited “national” preacher who gave a revivalistic fervor sermon with a great altar call at the end.

And then, stuck in between that teaching and that preaching, we heard a morning sermon from a bishop from Los Angeles, a woman who had been elected bishop clear back in 1992 (19 years ago!) which must (based on her appearance today) mean she was elected bishop when she was 15 years old. And she preached a sermon so very, very quietly, particularly in comparison to the charismatic and bombastic bookends of that other Pentecostal teaching and preaching. She talked about the “in between times” in life, quoting from the book we used for a short term study earlier this year here at Saint Marks: ***Transitions, by William Bridges***. It is in these times, she preached, that we must **WAIT**.

Her preaching made me change the report that I gave to the Conference after her sermon. Her preaching about the **“in between times,”** the **WAITing times,** led me to begin my report with the words from Psalm 131:

O Lord, I am not proud; I have no haughty looks. I do not occupy myself with great things or things that are too hard for me. But I still my soul and make it quiet, like a child upon its mother’s breast. Like a child upon its mother’s breast, my soul is quieted within me. O Israel, wait upon the Lord....

So how is it that God works in the lives of God’s people? The fiery jump and down, get excited power from on high experience? Or the more quiet waiting experience?

How is it that God has worked, and continues to work in your life?

Can you imagine what it would be like, if the Holy Spirit came down upon this worship at Saint Marks this morning and caught us up in the tornado like experience of the scripture lesson – of wind and tongues of fire. And we'd all get so excited and revved up for Jesus that people would accuse us of being drunk. And our only justification that we weren't drunk is because it's still too early in the day for that?!

Maybe when you hear the description from the scripture that will be read, God might just cause it to happen. Maybe. **I NEVER rule out possibilities for God. God has spent much of my life in proving that I ought never rule out possibilities for God.**

Today, I going to share another description, of how the Kingdom of God works on us, from Eugene Peterson, Bible translator, retired preacher and teacher, and author. He is the author of the modern Biblical translation, *The Message*.

“As a pastor, I don't like being viewed as a nice, but insignificant. I bristle when a high-energy executive leaves the place of worship with the comment, ‘This was wonderful, Pastor, but now we have to get back to the real world, don't we?’ ...

“I bristle and want to assert my importance. I want to force the recognition of the key position I hold in the economy of God and in *his [the high energy executive's]* economy if only he knew it.

“**Then I remember that I am a subversive.** My long term effectiveness depends on my not being recognized for who I really am. **If he realized that I actually believe the American way of life is doomed to destruction, and that another kingdom is right now being formed in secret to take its place, he wouldn't be at all pleased. If he knew what I was really doing and the difference it was making, he would fire me.**

“Yes, I believe that. I believe that the kingdoms of this world, American, Venezuelan and Chinese, will become the kingdom of our God and Christ, and I believe this new kingdom is already among us. That is why I'm a pastor, to introduce people to the real world and train them to live in it. I learned early that the methods of my work must correspond to the realities of [God's] kingdom. The methods that make America strong – economic, military, technological, informational – are not suited to making the kingdom of God strong. I have had to learn a new methodology:

- “Truth-telling and love-making,

- “Prayer and parable.

“These are not methods very well adapted to raising the standard of living in suburbia or massaging the ego into a fashionable shape.

“But America and suburbia and the ego compose my parish. Most of the individuals in this [community] **suppose that the goals they have for themselves** and the **goals God has for them** are the same.

“It is **the oldest religious mistake**: refusing to countenance any real difference between God and us, imagining God to be a vague extrapolation of our own desires, and then hiring a priest to manage the affairs between self and that extrapolation. And I, one of the priests they hired, am having none of it.

“But if I’m not willing to help them become what they want to be, what am I doing taking their pay? I am being subversive. I am **undermining the kingdom of self** and **establishing the kingdom of God**. I am helping them to become what God wants them to be, using the methods of subversion.”

And what’s more, Peterson is bold enough to say that this kind of undercover, subversive way of working is indeed the same way that Jesus worked.

- How did Jesus teach? He mostly told stories.
- How did his stories bring about the Kingdom of God? They weren’t stories about church. They were stories about the ordinary affairs of their lives.
- And how did his stories teach us the Kingdom of God works? Like leaven in bread. Like mustard seeds in the ground. Like salt in the food.
- Little things that get into the stuff of life and then slowly, quietly, gently change and re-shape that into which it enters.

Very subversive stuff.

Now, and this is not something Eugene Peters says; this is **something Monty Brown says**:

I’m not that good. Not as good as Eugene Peterson.

Because I’m too much a product of the American culture myself – like maybe you.

You see, God is still working methodically, slowly, gently, sometimes in fits and starts, to reshape my life into Kingdom living.

But – God is INDEED still working in me, bringing me around. And I'm hopeful that I can be some salt or seed or leaven in your lives, as well.

I do know that when life throws curve balls my way, that this is one of the times when I most need to pay attention. When life doesn't live up to my expectations, then (I have come to learn) this is a time in which I need to re-examine those expectations and be open to God's Kingdom expectancies.

It's very – so VERY – easy to get on a roll with life, and place God into the role of being either ONLY a comforter, OR some pyrotechnical explosive device. But I have learned that **God will not be limited** to just the roles of teddy bear OR tornado. God is much more, and God will do much more. But, most of the time (at least this has been my experience) **God works undercover. God works in sneaky ways.**

Like Salt. Like Seed. Like Leaven.

And the other thing I am learning – **God is turning things upside down**. Just like that scripture we read to begin our worship today. It's why we are turning the bulletin upside down and doing the worship all backwards: to alert ourselves to the very, very real fact:

- God loves us just as we are. **We are beloved children of God, precious and beautiful to behold.**
- And the **transformation** begins – **must begin** – with the **acceptance of that** in not just our heads, but our **hearts as well**.
- But God is about **TRANSFORMATION**. And God, who loves us just as we are, is never content to leave us like that.

God has a kingdom. And that kingdom was at the heart of Jesus' message: **Repent the kingdom is at hand**. And that kingdom was at the center of every single thing that Jesus taught. **If you believe that Jesus came just to "save you"** then, unfortunately, you have **allowed too many other people to shape how you read the scripture.**

Jesus came to save **THE WORLD**.

And that means changing it.

Sometimes, he does **big splashy things**. Parting the **Red Sea**. **Feeding a civic center size crowd with two kids meals from McDonalds**. **Sending the Holy Spirit in like a tornado**.

But most of the time, he works: Like **Salt**. Like **Seed**. Like **Leaven**.

But, always, he is working for transformation.

The Pentecost experience, scripture tells us, is real. Regardless of which way Jesus intervenes in your life, it will be **REAL**. It will be **TRANSFORMATIVE**. And it will be in a **LANGUAGE WE CAN UNDERSTAND**.

And **so, too, as Jesus works**, are those who **choose to put on Jesus' name: "Christ-ian"** called to work.

- Some of us may be called to be fiery, bombastic evangelistic teachers and preachers.
- Some of us may be called to be subversive, undercover agents.
- But, once Jesus gets under our skins, transformation requires us to make a difference.

And hence, it became apparent to me, as this wee sermon was handed to me by my "handler" -- the handler is the one who feeds instructions to the undercover agent -- **we are to be undercover agents, but not MOLES**.

MOLES are a special type of undercover agent. A MOLE is a secret agent who is planted into an enemy country a long, long time before the action to be taken. It is suspected that Japanese moles were planted into America as teenagers, years before Pearl Harbor, with the specific purpose of being totally invisible, and then later being activated into service. The effectiveness of a mole depended upon them being completely invisible, and becoming part of the "enemy culture" until such time as being activated. Sometimes they never were activated. Sometimes, in their being invisible for a long time, they became a part of the enemy culture, and lost their effectiveness to be activated as an undercover agent.

Jesus works like an undercover agent in our life – quietly, patiently, persistently transforming us to the life of God's Kingdom.

We are called to act like undercover agents in the life around us — quietly, patiently, persistently transforming our community to the life of God's Kingdom.

That undercover work NEVER means being invisible, becoming like the community being targeted. **WE ARE DIFFERENT.**

I heard a story once. It may not be factual, but it's probably true.

Once upon a time, three wise and powerful men were given the task of hiding God so that He would never be found. The first one said that God should be hidden in a far away galaxy. The second one said that a rocket ship might accidentally discover God there, and proposed that God would be best hidden in the floor of the ocean. But the third one believed that the day would come when the need to feed an expanding population would drive humans to the ocean floor to feed the world, and hence God would be found. This last one, therefore, suggested that the best place to hide God would be inside each person. They will never find God there.

Well, like I said: probably not a factual story, but a true one, as to WHERE we need to look for God. Because there is that story we know to be true: that We are each one created in the very image of God. God really is inside each of us.

But God is not content to remain dormant in a DNA molecule. God is slowly persistently working undercover:

- Like **Salt.** Like **Seed.** Like **Leaven.**
- **And sometimes like a great tornado.**
- But **God is always working for our good. Always.**

Will we, the Church, respond, and do our part ... BE the BODY OF CHRIST? It really does involve turning the whole world upside down.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.