

Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B
Ezek 17:22-24
Ps 92 *passim*
2Cor5:6-10
Mk 4:26-34

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St. Petronille Parish, Glen Ellyn
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Here we are back in Ordinary Time, the green season. Each liturgical season has a theme. The theme that runs through Ordinary Time is discipleship: what does it mean to follow Jesus? In our second reading today, from the Second Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul tells us that we have to look through God's eyes. But God's eyes don't work like human eyes, and that takes some getting used to. We walk by faith, he says, and not by sight. We walk by faith because Jesus showed us the way. He showed us by his life and by his teaching. And the way Jesus taught was, by and large, by telling stories.

Jesus is the fullness of God's Self-revelation. If we want to know God, we look to Jesus. Jesus shows us what God is like. Jesus shows us what God created us human beings to be and to do. Jesus told stories because that's the way we human beings are wired: we tend to forget points and precepts; we tend to remember stories.

The stories Jesus told are usually referred to as parables. Parables are stories that teach us a truth. Parables make a point. And usually the point of a parable challenges us. We walk by faith and not by sight. We may well think we're getting along just fine, when suddenly God draws us up short. God surprises us. God tells us when we are walking by sight, when we are trusting to our own powers, and not walking by faith.

In today's Gospel Jesus is telling us that we scatter seeds but God alone makes the seed sprout and grow. And the course of the seed's development and the richness of the harvest are up to God and not to us. And God makes do with all manner of seeds. The cedars of Lebanon Ezekiel talked about are strong and high and majestic, but God works just as well with a mustard bush. In fact wild mustard is an invasive species, which farmers and gardeners hate because once it's taken hold of a field, it's almost impossible to uproot. So it is with the word of God.

There are modern parables. Frequently parables masquerade as jokes. But not all jokes as parables. *The past, the present, and the future each walked into a bar. It was tense.* That's an example of a joke – a bad joke maybe – that's not a parable.

Some parables are short. My dad (may he rest in peace) was born in Scotland. He used to love telling the story of the Scotsman who prayed to win the lottery. He prayed and prayed and prayed. Finally, God came to him in a dream and said, "Sandy, gimme a break! You gotta buy a ticket!"

Then there's the man who got caught in a flood. He stood on his front porch watching the water rise when his neighbor came by in a rowboat and offered to take him to safety. "No," he said. "I trust in the Lord. The Lord will save me." The water rose up to his second-story window. A motorboat offered rescue but he waved them on. "I trust in the Lord," he said. "The Lord will save me." The water continued to rise. Now the man was on his roof clinging to the chimney. A helicopter dropped a ladder and beckoned him to climb aboard, but he refused. "I trust in the Lord. The Lord will save me." The man drowned. Standing before the judgment seat of God, he cried, "Lord, I trusted in you! Why didn't you save me?" And God replied, "Gimme a break! I sent you two boats and a helicopter!"

I will leave you with one last parable, this one from a Jesuit priest named Anthony de Mello. He was from India and died in 1987, at the age of 55.

On a rocky seacoast, where shipwrecks were frequent, there was once a ramshackle little life-saving station. It was no more than a hut and there was only one boat, but the few people who manned the station were a devoted lot who kept constant watch over the sea and, with little regard for themselves and their own safety, went fearlessly out in a storm if they had any evidence that there had been a shipwreck somewhere. Many lives were thus saved and the station became famous.

As the fame of the station grew, so did the desire of people in the neighborhood to associate themselves with its excellent work. They generously offered of their time and money, and as a result new members were enrolled, new boats bought, and new crews trained. The hut too was replaced by a comfortable building which could adequately handle the needs of those who had been saved from the sea and, of course, since shipwrecks do not occur every day, it became a popular gathering place – a sort of local club.

As time passed the members became so engaged in socializing that they had little interest in life-saving, though they duly sported the life-saving emblem on the badges they wore. As a matter of fact, when some people were actually rescued from the sea, it was always such a nuisance because they were dirty and sick and they soiled the carpeting and the furniture.

Soon the social activities of the club became so numerous and the life-saving activities so few that there was a showdown at a club meeting, with some members insisting that they return to their original purpose and activity. A vote was taken and these trouble-makers, who proved to be a small minority, were invited to leave the club and start another.

Which is precisely what they did – a little farther down the coast, with such selflessness and daring that, after a while, their heroism made them famous. Whereupon their membership was enlarged, their hut was reconstructed . . . , and their idealism was smothered.

If you happen to visit that area today you will find a number of exclusive clubs dotting the shoreline. Each one of them is justifiably proud of its origin and its traditions. Shipwrecks still occur in those parts, but nobody seems to care much.

Anthony de Mello, S.J., *The Prayer of the Frog: A Book of Study Meditations*, vol. 1.