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## *Life's a Miracle ... Speak Yet Again*

**A sermon by the Rev. Bill Harkins**

**Third Sunday after Pentecost**

**Year B**

**Mark 4:26-34**

**In the name of the God of creation who loves us all, Amen.** Good morning, Happy Father's Day, and welcome to the Cathedral on this Third Sunday in the long, green season of Pentecost. The images from our Gospel reading this morning include the example of seeds that grow in measure disproportionate to that which is expected, and from humble origins. As we know, Jesus often used parables as extended metaphors, and today is no exception. It is fitting that he would do so, since his own life was a parable in exactly this way. To hear today's Gospel is to enter a world of mystery. The "someone" who scatters the seed "does not know how" it sprouts and grows while he is asleep. We find these metaphors of growth, new life, and a surprising and life-giving greening of the world beyond all expectations, and it happens, grace-like, even if we sleep right through it. What's more, in the Gospel of Mark Jesus tells us that this mysterious flourishing is precisely what the Kingdom of God is like. This domain grows in mysterious fashion, and its power is independent, ultimately, of our often frantic human endeavors. Life emerges, like the Church arising from a small band of disciples, from beyond the limits of human efficacy or understanding. Indeed, this life-giving essence of the kingdom, not bound by the ordinary rules and expectations of our lives, is in stark contrast to our human finitude, expectations, presumptions, and hubris—in contrast, that is, to our tendency to treat life as knowable, predictable, and proscribed, as ultimately within our control. My classmate Wendy Farley, who now teaches at Emory, has suggested that this mystery, this kingdom work, "is not like the frantic busyness of works righteousness", not like, that is, "our normal way of being human, achieving all sorts of goods by working hard." These are all good things, she says, but the Kingdom of God is not the same as our ordinary way of doing things, and Jesus is calling us to a different way of being in the world and with ourselves, one another, and God. This raises questions about exactly what we have control over, and what we do not, and about the mystery and surprise at the heart of our relationship with God.

And so with Father's Day having arrived, and in light of these Gospel themes, I found myself turning once again to King Lear, my favorite of Shakespeare's plays. It is a play about fathers, of course, and about the mystery and limits and vicissitudes of human nature. Yet this is not all. It is a tragedy, yes, but it contains much wisdom about life in families, kindness, despair, control, compassion, and redemption—it's better than any reality show on TV. My favorite part of the play is actually a subplot in which the aging Earl of Gloucester is, as the author Wendell Berry puts it, "recalled from his despair so that he may die in his full humanity." As Berry reminds us the old Earl has been blinded in retribution for his loyalty to King Lear. And, like Lear, he is guilty of a kind of operational theology of scarcity: he lives as if life is predictable, ultimately knowable, and within his control. He is, in short, in despair. Moreover, despite his many admirable qualities, the Earl of Gloucester lives as if there is not enough grace to go around. As such his life is primarily informed by that of which he is afraid. The results are predictable. He has falsely accused and alienated his loyal and loving son Edgar. Exiled and sentenced to death, Edgar disguises himself as a drifter and beggar. Thus disguised to his father, he becomes in fact his father's guide. Gloucester asks to be lead to the cliffs of Dover, where in his despair he intends to kill himself by throwing himself onto the rocks below. Edgar's self-appointed task, Berry tells us, is to save his father from despair, and he succeeds, for Gloucester dies eventually "Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief," (V, iii, 199). He dies, that is, within the appropriate boundaries of human living as God intends.

This is a wonderful and cautionary tale not only for Father's Day, but in light of the Gospel text for today. Edgar does not want his father to give up on life. To do so is, as Wendell Berry puts it, "to pass beyond the possibility of change or redemption." Put differently and in the language of Ezekiel, Edgar hopes "to make the dry tree flourish." He wants new life to emerge from the tiniest of seeds. And so he does not lead his father to the edge of the cliff, but rather only tells him he has done so. Gloucester renounces the world, blesses his ostensibly absent son Edgar, and as Shakespeare directs, he "falls forward and swoons." Upon regaining consciousness Gloucester is led by his son to believe that he has miraculously survived the fall. Pretending to be a passer-by who has seen this happen, Edgar assumes the remarkable and life-giving role of a spiritual guide to his own father. In an exchange that will be familiar to many who have tried to help family members in trouble, Gloucester, dismayed to find himself still alive, attempts to refuse help: "*Away, and let me die*" (IV, vi, 48). And after several lines in which he attempts to persuade his father that he is a stranger, Edgar speaks what are for me the most significant lines of the play: "Father, *Thy life's a miracle. Speak yet again.*" (IV, VI, 55). In so doing, Edgar calls his father back from despair and "into the properly subordinated human life of grief and joy, where change and redemption are possible."

Shakespeare, wise in this as in so very much, knew what Jesus is trying to tell us in today's Gospel: that to presume to "understand" human living is to exhaust the infinite possibilities of God's creation. It is to treat as predictable and mechanical the miracle of the mustard seed and the harvest of grain, the nature of whose sprouting and growing we know not. To reduce life to the scope of our understanding is to give up on it, and to render it beyond the hope of transformation. It is to commit the idolatry of attempting to legislate the mystery of God out of our lives by pretending to be gods ourselves.

Well, as the father of two sons, I have many memories in relation to which I identify with Gloucester. One in particular has been on my mind of late and bears a resemblance to Shakespeare's play. A couple of summers ago, I journeyed with my sons to the Northern Cascades for a mountaineering trip, the ultimate goal of which was to summit Mt. Baker. Or, so I thought. I meticulously planned this trip, including researching and hiring the best guide service I could find. After a hard day of hiking up to our basecamp on Heliotrope Ridge, and spending a couple of days learning crevasse rescue and getting accustomed to climbing on ice, we finally departed our camp at 2 a.m. for the summit attempt. The night was clear and cold, and as we climbed steadily, our team, roped together, moved inexorably toward the summit of Mt. Baker. Each deliberate step brought us closer to the hoped for sunrise atop this jewel of the Cascades. The stars were more bountiful than any I'd ever seen. The Roman Wall loomed just ahead and above us, hiding behind it the caldera at the summit. It was such a joy to be with my sons, roped in, working for a common goal, as the lights of Vancouver shimmered in the distant valley as if in a galaxy far, far away. Soon, however, lightning appeared off to the west as a line of powerful, pre-dawn thunderstorms announced a fast-moving cold front. It looked like the fireworks at Lenox on the Fourth of July, and it did not bode well. In consultation with Angela, our wise and gifted guide, we made the group decision to return to camp, with the wind, rain, and lightning close behind. I wanted the mountaintop "we had worked so very hard for it" and what I got was a storm. I was disappointed, and worse, felt disappointed for my sons. We made our way back down to base-camp much, much faster than we came up, and with each footfall my disappointment grew in proportion to the loss of that hard-won altitude. We made it back to our tents just as the storm broke, and safely inside, we slept.

Later the next day, in conversation with my boys, our older son, the most experienced mountaineer among us, said something I'll never forget in response to my lamentation and disappointment. "Dad, the first rule of climbing is that you never climb into a storm. That's mountaineering 101. We did the right thing. Besides, he said, just look around us, right now." And so I did. And I saw the magnificent Deming-Roosevelt glacier flowing like a river of diamonds below us, and the fields of glorious wildflowers through which we hiked up to camp, and the nearby ravens who stole my carabineer, and the love in the eyes of my dear sons, who got what I had missed "that we were together on this remarkable adventure, and we loved one another. And I knew in that moment that they wondered why I was so focused on the summit that I had become blind to all of this. I looked at Andrew, our younger son, and a wise old soul for all his youth, and he just nodded in agreement with his brother, and smiled. My sons had become spiritual guides to their father.

What I remember most about the trip now, back in life in the Blue Ridge foothills, is not the fact that we did not summit, but that we were together, and that our disciplines and practices led us to remember what was most valuable and important. I had to reconcile my return to level ground with a deeper awareness of the nature of the journey, a journey perhaps more ambiguous, and risky.

Because you see, dear one's, I, like Gloucester, was presuming to exhaustively "know" the world prior to examining all the options""prior to paying attention to the richness of possibilities that might be life-giving. And, what's worse, I lost sight of my sons in the process. And this blinded me to the ability to be in the present moment, which is after all the only moment we have. Indeed I, like Gloucester, was blind, in despair, and I had engaged in the hubris of presuming to "know" when in fact I did not. I had let my own need to over-function and achieve""in this case achieve the summit""rob me of being present here, and now.

Like Edgar, my sons called their father into the life-giving possibilities of new relationship in the present moment. They loved me enough to say that I had missed the point. Though we have life, the Gospel of Mark tells us, its deepest mystery, like that of the mustard seed, is beyond us. And Jesus, this teller and Incarnation of parables, invites us to come alive to the mystery, paradox, and tension of his death, which led to life. As Wendell Berry reminds us we do not know how we have life, or why. It is not predictable, and though we can destroy it, we cannot make it. It is Holy. "To think otherwise is to enslave life, and to make, not humanity, but a few humans its predictably inept masters." "*Thy life's a miracle. Speak yet again.*" Indeed. Gloucester's suicide attempt is a misguided response to despair, an attempt to gain ultimate control over life""control which he mistakenly believes he once had and has lost. My presumptuous assumption that only a summit of Mt. Baker could constitute success was a misguided effort to control what I could not. And maybe I was denying their growing up, and out, and forgetting that part of being a parent is letting go of our children as they live their own lives.

My sisters and brothers, our prayer must be that we will have the grace to live fully into the new lives we are already living. This is the paschal mystery of each moment of our lives. It is, as Ronald Rolheiser suggests, Pentecost""to recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit given to us here, now, in the particularity of new life appropriate to the circumstances in which we now find ourselves living. Later, under the guidance of his son, Gloucester prays a prayer that is as Wendell Berry says, exactly the opposite of his previous one""

**You ever-gentle gods, take my breath from me;  
Let not my worser spirit tempt me again  
To die before you please. (IV, VI, 213-215)**

In so praying, "he renounces control over his life. He has given up his life as an understood possession, and has taken it back as miracle and mystery." And this miraculous, redemptive reclamation""this flourishing back to life as a human being""is acknowledged in Edgar's response: "*Well pray you, father.*" (IV, VI, 215). Later, King Lear derisively asks Gloucester how a blind man can "see how this world goes." "*I see it feelingly.*" Gloucester replies in his restored humanity. As Berry says, to treat life as less than a miracle is to give up on it. "Thy life's a miracle. Speak yet again." This is paschal mystery faith. This is Pentecost faith. This is mustard seed faith. Amen.