

“A CINDERELLA STORY”
1 Samuel 15:34-16:13; Mark 4:26-34
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June 18, 2006
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Our scripture lessons for today include the anointing of young David and parables about seeds and how they grow. I suspect it might be obvious in hearing the text from Samuel why I chose “A Cinderella Story” as my title today. But this title works equally well for both passages, as Cinderella has rather complex connotations that are lifted up in differing ways in these two texts. They lead us into the realm of fairy tale, into sports imagery, and, most importantly, into a place where we can understand a little more about God.

Let us begin with the fairy tale. Most of us, I would guess, have seen the Disney version of Cinderella, complete with the evil stepmother and the petty sisters who scowl at young Cinderella as she works and cleans, doing all the lowly tasks for the family. Although she is a family member, Cinderella is the family outcast, treated essentially as a maid and left to do the family’s chores. As long as the work gets done, she is forgotten. Forgotten, that is, until she attends the gala ball where she disappears at the appointed hour, leaving behind her shoe as she returns to her lowly status in the house. In classic fairy tale form, the prince has fallen in love with her during the ball, but she has resumed her “proper place” in the family and is thus nowhere to be found—even as the owner of the shoe is sought throughout the kingdom. An emissary arrives at the house and the sisters try on the shoes. But Disney’s animation and our lesson collide when the emissary asks the sisters, “You are the only ladies of the household I presume.” And finally, amid romantic music, Cinderella tries on “her” shoe and is anointed as “the one.”

In today’s lesson, Samuel is looking for the one who will succeed Saul. It is dangerous duty that Samuel has been assigned, so he concocts a cover story about sacrificing a heifer and goes to see Jesse in Bethlehem. His cover story works, and he calls upon Jesse to present his sons, for one is to be anointed. And so the progression begins; no shoe this time, for the Lord is looking for more than the right sized foot. The Lord tells Samuel, “*Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.*” And so Eliab, Abinadab, and Shammah all come before Samuel, but none is chosen. In fact, Jesse brought all seven of his sons to pass before Samuel, but none were chosen and Samuel said to Jesse, “The Lord has not chosen any of these.”

And Samuel asks, “Are these all of your sons?” And I can picture Jesse stammering a bit as he says, “No, there is one more, but he is tending the sheep.” Even Jesse, the father, is sure that his young son, the one who is tending the sheep at that very moment, can’t be the one. But God has another plan; for when that sheep-tending boy enters, God says, “Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.” And there we meet him, too; and finally, after his anointing, we discover that his name is David: the one whom the shoe fits, the one who will become the great king, “and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.” Our own little Cinderella story—no

evil sisters, no Disney, no bibity-bobity-boo. Instead, there is the call of God; and even if he is last in line, it does wrest upon David and the fairy tale version is complete—or in this case begun, because, as we know, much lies ahead for David.

In our second lesson, this one from the gospel of Mark, we also have a Cinderella story of sorts. This one, however, is of a more contemporary version—the one that is sought each year as the NCAA basketball tournament begins, as the Olympics begin, or when upstart “mom and pop” businesses grab a toe-hold in a market and people begin to rally around them. This is a lesson about underdogs: the small school that rises up to compete with Duke and UCLA. For Spokane people like me, Gonzaga’s rise to national prominence is the most important example; another is of Ben and Jerry’s mixing good ice cream and corporate ethics and finding a way to compete with Dryer’s. It is Eddie the Eagle, flying to Olympic “glory” as the worst ski-jumper, who trains and jumps with incredible heart. This lesson is for the underdogs: the ones we call Cinderella as we look for good stories amid the cut-throat realities of business and big-time sports. In our gospel passage, we find two parables that Jesus uses to illustrate the power and potential of the individual AND the power and potential of God.

The Kingdom of God is. . . ? Doesn’t this seem like a great fill-in-the-blank question for children? I suspect that from children or adults we might get an answer that is as obscure as the ones that Jesus gives. He says, “The kingdom of God is as if you would scatter seeds upon the ground and then sleep, for they will grow, unbeknownst to you and they will be harvested too.” Or perhaps, “It is like a mustard seed, the smallest of seeds, yet it grows into the greatest of all shrubs.”

What is this talk of seeds? What does it mean? More importantly, where is Cinderella here? These parables announce that from the very smallest things, from little seeds that have potential but nothing more, from them will come the future of the church. I think it is interesting to note that our lesson concludes by saying Jesus told the disciples what to make of these parables; but I guess when Mark was putting together his gospel, that part just didn’t make the cut. And so *we* must try to understand what Jesus was saying. I think it is actually easier than we think. In the seeds that grow virtually untended and in those mustard seeds that grow to become large bushes, there is nothing but potential. And as Jesus told these parables, he did so to the disciples, a rag-tag bunch of non-descript followers who, nonetheless, would soon be entrusted with the future of the Jesus movement. There was both a warning in this passage and a promise of bountiful harvest. In this passage, Jesus is setting the table for this upstart band of followers to become the ones who would lead this movement into a faith that would become the Christianity that we know today. Jesus knew the disciples, and he knew that they were unprepared for what stood ahead of them. And so he began a subtle process of propping up, toughening, and laying a foundation so the disciples would one day be able to take the reigns of the ministry that began with Jesus. These parables are a challenge to the disciples and an announcement that the “shoe” would soon be on the other foot.

What then are we to do with these passages? First, from the anointing of young David, I think we must understand that there are great stories of untapped potential in our midst. The anointing of David asks us to look deeper into our churches, into our neighborhoods, into our schools,

perhaps even into our government, to find those who should be called into greater service, and then to use those gifts to the very greatest potential.

First, we must hear this passage and use it as impetus for self-examination. It is that “Is it I?” moment that we heard about in the call of Isaiah in last week’s service. The anointing of David should be an announcement to us to look inside and see if we are hearing the call or if we have just placed ourselves outside, watching the sheep so that we can remain safe and comfortable with what we are doing. Sheep surely need tending, but sometimes we also need to find our way to the line so that we can be anointed for the gifts and talents that we are much more comfortable hiding deep within ourselves. First then, this is a call to introspection and self-evaluation.

Secondly, I think this passage calls upon us to look outside of ourselves and find the places where untapped potential is being missed, ignored, or squelched. This is the justice piece of our little Cinderella story: We are called upon not just to applaud the Cinderellas that make it into view but also to be out there looking for them. Just last week, I met with the committee that is organizing October’s “Transforming Faith” conference to be held here in Corvallis. We are one of the local sponsors of this event that is spearheaded by ecumenical groups and The Community of Welcoming Congregations (of which our church is a member). This event will bring together upwards of 400 transgendered people of faith in an effort to help them mobilize and find support in their various settings of ministry. Among the many pieces of planning, we found ourselves spending a few minutes talking about security, because we aren’t sure who might come to stand in opposition to the presence of transgendered folks in the church (and maybe even in society). And I found myself thinking about the laundry lists that have been used through the generations to deny people access to inclusion in the church and society: age, gender, race, sexual orientation, immigration status, nation of origin, economic status, education, and political affiliation. This conference is important because of the opportunity it offers to celebrate the breadth of folks who are called and accepted by God. This is an historic conference, and it is happening here—in Corvallis. It is a Cinderella story to be sure, because transgendered folks and other sexual minorities often aren’t even invited to the church balls; and yet, in October, their faith and their calls will be front and center. And Christ’s church will be blessed!

Last week, after that planning meeting for the “Transforming Faith” conference, I found myself listening to the Indigo Girls’ song, “This Train Revisited, in a new way. This song recounts, in vivid detail, the trains that went to the concentration camps and the losses of the Holocaust by naming just a few of the gifted people lost forever. Those lyrics picture just a few of the lost: “Here is a dancer, here is a teacher, here is a runner, here is a healer, here is a builder, here is a thinker, here is a writer who has no voice, here is potential gone for good.” The lyrics are devastating and I find them to also be a warning of what might be lost amid future fears and hatreds. But when we recognize that David’s call didn’t come because of ambition or anything at all that he did *but because God chose him*, I believe it is so much easier to accept that God’s call comes to many different people: straight, gay, and, yes, even transgendered. Here is potential. . .for good.

Finally, from the anointing of David to the possibility of the mustard tree seed, I think one of the messages we must hear is of potential and harvest. A few weeks ago, at the Adult Education

forum, I shared my experience at the 20's/30's Clergy Conference held in Cleveland. I mentioned that there is a coming shortage, both of 20/30 clergy and also of clergy, in general, in the UCC. People are simply not training for ministry in the numbers of previous generations and this soon will become a crisis for the church. There is phenomenal potential for ministry in our churches—both lay and ordained—that we are not nurturing and developing. This must change. And so as we hear of the anointing of young David and listen to the parables of small seeds growing into bountiful crops and bushes, I implore you to look around at our youth and recognize that some of them may be the future clergy of our church. But don't just look to them; look at yourself also, comfortable and stable in the midst of your chosen career. Maybe it is you who is called. Look at your children and grandchildren; how can we better nurture them and also nurture the church of the future? I know some of you are thinking that I am not talking to you. . .but I am. That bumbling group of disciples somehow managed to see to it that the church carried on after Jesus died, didn't they? The last kid chosen for the team became David; why shouldn't it be you?

Our tradition is filled with Cinderella stories, with people becoming “more” than anyone ever imagined. So I am not willing to ask you simply *if* the shoe fits but, instead, “How *does* the shoe fit and where will you walk with it on your foot?”

Thanks be to God. Amen.