



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“THE SUPRISING POWER OF CHRISTIAN CONSCIENCE”

Scripture Lessons: Micah 6:6-8; Matthew 13:31-33

*This sermon was preached Rev. Art Gatewood on Sunday, January 20, 2019
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Jesus taught us to pray that God’s kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven. People asked him, “But what is God’s kingdom like?” And he responded with a parable. Two of those kingdom parables are our New Testament lesson for today. (Read Matthew 13: 31 – 22).

A tiny seed, becomes a huge bush. Tiny. HUGE. A tiny amount of yeast, infects a huge amount of bread and it rises. Tiny. HUGE. So where do we go with these two short parables? Parables are very slippery. You read the same parable at different times in your life’s journey. And the parable means something new and different. Almost like holding up a mirror, a parable can reflect a new time and place. So what’s our time and place today? Our time and place that might be reflected in these two short parables?

If you have kids at home, you know the time. We’re in a three day weekend. The Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday weekend. A time to reflect on our nation’s progress toward racial equality of opportunity. We’ve come a long way in my lifetime, and yet we have some more work to do.

When you hold up a mirror to your life, this weekend, what do you see? I recall my high school English class, the week we read Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. A novel set in a small town in Alabama, a story told by a 4th grade girl. Our class discussed race prejudice. We discussed an innocent man wrongly convicted. We discussed right and wrong. We talked about the formation of Christian conscience in a brother and sister. We talked about formation of Christian conscience, in ourselves. It was a small thing. One week in one class, with one little paperback book. A tiny thing. A tiny thing. Did you know that this one little book has been the second most influential book in the lives of millions of Americans? (The first most influential is the Bible). One little book, exploring right and wrong. Exploring racial justice in a fictional small town. Tiny. That tiny book has helped millions of young people to develop their sense of right and wrong, develop their Christian conscience. That’s HUGE. That’s what I recall from my high school days. And I became aware of a Christian conscience forming in me. That’s what I see reflected in the mirror of these parables, here and now, this weekend, in Charleston. How about you? What do you see?

What do I see this weekend that reflects my awareness of the slow march of civil rights for all Americans? I see a black and white TV in the main lounge of my college dorm. Guys would finish our supper in the college cafeteria, then get back to our dorm to watch the evening news. Walter Cronkite. Huntley and Brinkley. The news of the day, with some film. Thirty minutes. The previous semester we had seen the assassination of our president. It was incredible. What would we see next?

We saw hundreds of people, dressed in their Sunday best, walking a two lane road to their courthouse to register to vote. We saw boys and girls, all dressed up; boys and girls knocked down by fire hoses; girls and boys threatened by vicious dogs. But I don't have to tell you. Many of you saw the same images we did: the bodies of the three young men, dug up from that earthen dam; the burned out hulk of that Greyhound bus; the dorm windows shot out by state troopers, at South Carolina State College, in Orangeburg. We were only a handful of students, watching one TV, in one small North Carolina college. But each night, in front of our TV, Christian conscience was being formed, as we watched scenes of right and wrong. It was so tiny. Tiny. It was HUGE. That's what I recall from my college days. It was the height of the civil rights movement. We were young, we were amazed at what we saw on the evening news.

Our college wasn't far from Charleston, a four hour drive. At that time we didn't know about Septima Clark and the struggle for equal pay for equal work at the MUSC hospital. It wasn't until we moved here eight years ago, and started to drive the cross-town named in her honor, that we learned about her, and the civil rights movement here in Charleston. I see those black and white news film images, reflected in the mirror of these two short parables, on this weekend, in this time and place.

"What is the kingdom of heaven like, Rabbi?" And he said to them: It's tiny. Tiny. It's HUGE. And today I recognize the amazing power of Christian conscience that kept that movement going forward. Tiny steps. Tiny steps. Steps that grew and grew and became: HUGE.

Only three years. Rabbi Jesus taught parables for three years. A few men and women followed him. Many did not follow him. At his death, only a dozen men and several women. A tiny following, they were, that's all they were, to remember and re-teach his parables and sayings. We know his tiny band of followers had a rough time of it. Persecuted. Many killed. And yet, the teachings of Jesus multiplied. The number of those who followed Jesus grew and grew.

"What is the kingdom of heaven like, Rabbi?" It's like a tiny seed. Tiny. Tiny. Grows into a huge bush. It's like a small scoop of yeast, which affects dozens of loaves of bread. From such tiny beginnings in Palestine, a handful of people, now we are millions and millions of Christians, world-wide. Tiny. ENORMOUS.

Right and wrong, we teach our children and grandchildren. And when they get to their teen age years, when they get into their young adult years, we recognize how complicated it can be to separate right from wrong. How complicated it is, to develop a Christian conscience. It happens to most people, developing a Christian conscience.

What is at the heart of a Christian conscience? Our Old Testament lesson today points to the heart of a Judeo-Christian conscience. Micah 6 says, "God has told you, O mortal, what is good. God has told us what the Lord requires of (us). To do justice, to love kindness, to walk humbly, with your God." That's the heart of a Judeo-Christian conscience.

And what did Jesus say about right and wrong? What was the heart of his teaching? What was the most important commandment about God? Jesus said we are to love God with all our heart

and soul and mind, and to love our neighbor as we love our selves. Unlock that commandment, and you will see the surprising power of Christian conscience un-leashed.

Race relations. The conduct of war. Gender issues. What do *you* see in your mirror, as you hold up these parables in the light of your Christian conscience?

Well, those are a few snapshots of what shaped *my* Christian conscience a few years ago. Those are the images I recall this weekend, at this time, and in this place. What about you?

Sermon by Rev. Art Gatewood, Parish Associate
First (Scots) Presbyterian Church, Charleston SC

January 20, 2019
Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend

This manuscript is provided for the use of First (Scots) Presbyterian Church members and friends. It is not meant for publication as not all sources are cited.