

Mark 4:26-34

You may remember there was a religious movement in the mid-1970s called Heaven's Gate. They believed that they could become immortal, and instead of dying, would ascend to heaven while alive aboard a UFO. In 1997 most of them died by suicide, expecting to be taken aboard the UFO as the Hale-Bopp comet approached the earth. But a few members were not at the group's main location, and for one reason or another did not kill themselves, so there are still living members of this movement who have not quite renounced it. I heard an interview with one of these survivors who talked about how he came to join. He had been sort of a spiritual tourist, and never found a religious tradition that was satisfying. His overall feeling was, "This can't be all there is," and when he found Heaven's Gate, he thought that he had found the spiritual enlightenment he'd been looking for.

One of the two founders of Heaven's Gate believed he was a reincarnation of Jesus. Their teachings weren't that original, but they were dramatic, so I think a spiritual seeker who wanted drama would find it there. But Jesus' parables about the kingdom of heaven cut against this appetite for drama. According to Jesus, the kingdom of heaven is easy to overlook, not dramatic at all. It's mysterious: just as a farmer can put the seed in the ground but then can't control or micromanage what happens after that, so the kingdom of God lands on the earth and takes root and grows according to its own internal logic. And the kingdom of heaven resembles some of the less impressive members of the plant kingdom: it spreads like a weed, and it does *not* grow into a monumental cedar of Lebanon, but into a shrub. I am very fond of the metaphor of kingdom of God as weed; I like the notion that it can't be controlled or eliminated, and that it's undesirable in the way that tax collectors and sinners and transgender people are undesirable—e.g., the kingdom of God reverses our norms. But I'm also struck by the stubborn

ordinariness of the metaphor: this is not a Charlton Heston image of the kingdom, or a Heaven's Gate image. The musical background is not a full orchestra but a tin whistle. The kingdom of heaven is to be found in things that risk being overlooked.

An Episcopal priest, Martha Sterne, writes that if she thought she could get people to know God by shouting the Ten Commandments at them, and posting the Ten Commandments in every public space, she would do that right away. But, she says,

God just doesn't work that way, for in Christ we don't have a God that wrote a huge poster of rules or yelled out the rules so loudly that every person on earth had to hear them. Instead, in Christ we have the God who showed us a small thing, a small mustard-seed life and death and new life of a small, single human being. And from that very small thing came a whole universe of meaning and life and love.

Several years ago Krista Tippett recorded a very interesting conversation with an Irish poet, Michael Longley. He was talking about the Troubles, the 30-year civil war that left 3,600 people dead and as many as 50,000 thousand injured. It ended with the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. He talked about the unlooked-for responsibility of being a poet during the Troubles, like a poet in wartime, and how much crappy poetry got written during WWII because it seemed like there should be poetry about it but then it wasn't really very good. It took him to thinking about the *Iliad*, which is certainly a poem about war, and especially about a section in which "the old king of Troy, Priam, goes to the tent, plucks up courage, goes to the tent of Achilles to beg for the body of Hector, his son, whom Achilles has killed, and Achilles is mutilating the body, dragging him after his chariot. And Priam visits Achilles and begs for the body of Hector."<sup>i</sup> So he compressed this story into a sonnet called "Ceasefire," which is quite amazing and you should read it. It ends with this scene of Priam and Achilles eating together, Achilles having honored the wishes of his dead enemy's father. It's not a happy ending, nor is it

a reconciliation, but it's a recognition of their common humanity and the claim of fatherhood.

But that's not my point. My point is, Longley felt, even as he wrote the poem, that in a way it was too soon. He was thinking of a man named Gordon Wilson had been blown up with his daughter; she died and he survived, and he said that he forgave his daughter's killers. He had Wilson in mind when he wrote about Priam, the father of the slain warrior who begged his body from his killer. But another reader told him, "I really admired your Achilles poem, but I'm not ready for it. My son was the victim earlier this year of a punishment beating. I'm not ready to forgive." And he sort of felt that there was another poem that needed to be written, and he wrote this:

"Who was it who suggested that the opposite of war  
Is not so much peace as civilization? He knew  
Our assassinated Catholic greengrocer who died  
At Christmas in the arms of our Methodist minister,  
And our ice-cream man whose continuing requiem  
Is the twenty-one flavours children have by heart.  
Our cobbler mends shoes for everybody; our butcher  
Blends into his best sausages leeks, garlic, honey;  
Our cornershop sells everything from bread to kindling.  
Who can bring peace to people who are not civilized?  
All of these people, alive or dead, are civilized."

Here's what strikes me about this poem. In dealing with the valid grief and anger that people felt at the violent loss of their loved ones, and at the grinding, incessant violence that was the Troubles, Longley took note of the ways that people *nevertheless* quietly insisted on recognizing their common humanity. The Protestant minister held and comforted the Catholic greengrocer as he died from an assassin's bullet. The ice cream man was murdered, and Langley's daughter used all her pocket money to buy a carnation to lay outside his store; the children remembered his 21 flavors of ice cream. Yes, it is too soon for his reader to even think

about forgiving the people who beat his son, but in the meantime people are being quietly kind and decent to one another, when they just as well might not be.

Jesus says that the farmer plants the seed but its growth is mysterious. The farmer has to kind of stand by while whatever takes place underground takes place. Then, though, she has to spring into action again and harvest what's grown, or else the process isn't complete. And that's what the kingdom of heaven is like, says Jesus. We commit ourselves to a mysterious process, but we don't control it. We have to stand back and pay attention, though, so that when the time comes we can reap what was sown. In a context like the Troubles in Ireland, you could easily overlook, and waste, some of the harvest, which was people's persistent decency to one another despite every incentive to be otherwise. It was a monumental achievement when the Good Friday Accords were reached in 1998, but I don't think that they could have held if ordinary people had not maintained that fragile fabric of connection over the years.

The small crowd of witnesses who gathered around George Floyd as he was being murdered by Derek Chauvin were not able to save his life. But they cried out, trying to get Chauvin to let up, and 17 year-old Darnella Frazier recorded the murder on her phone. The small, ordinary humanity of those witnesses germinated into a movement that is saving other lives, and calling us to pay closer attention to patterns and systems that some of us hadn't really taken seriously before.

The kingdom of heaven becomes evident when we realize that it's *at hand* and take seriously our potential for bending the moral arc of the universe toward justice, however minutely. As Martha Sterne writes, "We follow the God who showed up two thousand years ago in small ways on days of small things."<sup>ii</sup> And then God makes those things big.

Let us pray.

Give us grace, O Christ, to work while it is day, fulfilling diligently and patiently whatever duty you give us, doing small things in the day of small things and great labors if you call us to any. Go with us and we will go, but go with us for sure, and let us hear your voice when we follow. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://onbeing.org/programs/the-vitality-of-ordinary-things/#transcript>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf200262b/view>