

## **Spiritual Redwoods: Seeds**

Matthew 13:31-32

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*Jesus put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."*

*Matthew 13:31-32*

There are sacred spaces that connect us to the holy, to beauty, to the eternal, to Divine Mystery, to God. We have been missing our church building during this stay-at-home coronavirus pandemic. Faith communities around the country and around the world are missing their places of worship.

And yet I have had recent conversations and we've had discussions in our recent book study of the *Rebirthing of God* by John Philip Newell. And we talked about the truth that we are certainly in Sacred Space when we are outside in creation. There was a concept in the book called The Roofless Church. There's actually a place in New Harmony, Indiana where they built a Roofless Church. We were reminded that the rebirthing of the church must be about deep reconnecting to the earth.

Our congregation is deciding to do this in September. One of the joys of being outside here in San Rafael where our church building and property is that we have a circle of Coast Redwood trees right here. They are magnificent and incredibly tall. We've decided we are going to worship outside Under the Redwoods on Sunday mornings in September and explore what we can learn from them for our spiritual lives.

Today we're going to begin with seeds.

Today's scripture passage is about small things that point to larger things. The reign of God is like a mustard seed. Jesus is proclaiming this. Hundreds of people, maybe thousands came out to hear him speak. They are expecting a great preacher. He has a reputation. He is powerful. Perhaps he is the promised Messiah, the anointed one, in the line of the great King David.

They think they know what he will say. They are ready. They know it like we know what song to sing in the 7th inning stretch at a baseball game. They think that Jesus will probably quote Psalm 92. King Solomon's rule was like into the great Cypress Groves of Lebanon. In those days the trees seemed without end. In Psalm 92 we read

*The righteous flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of the Lord; they flourish in the courts of our God.*

So they just know Jesus would say that the Kingdom, the Reign of God is like ...a mighty cedar in all its glory, a great tree, tall and powerful, with deep roots. But Jesus surprises them. A mustard seed. A tiny seed. How can that be?

What we can learn from about redwoods and life if we can begin with seeds? The most astounding fact is that redwood trees spring from seeds so tiny that it takes three to six thousand of them to weigh one ounce. The great majestic trees rise from these tiny embryos and sweep the sky to embrace and capture the sunlight.

I think if Jesus was teaching today and he held up a redwood seed, and people had never seen a redwood, and he said the Reign of God is like one of these seeds, they would have thought that was ridiculous. Jesus is often surprising people with the ways that the Reign of God starts with something small and can become magnificent and powerful.

What can happen when those small seeds begin to grow? What can we learn from them? One of my favorite preachers is Susan Sparks. She is a pastor in New York City. Here are her reflections when she first visited a grove of redwoods in California a few years ago and what struck her.

*As I sat in that forest, I was struck by the cycle of life all around me. There were the great mature trees forming a huge canopy shading the entire forest. Then there were the tiny seeds and tiny seedlings; scrappy, feisty little green shoots straining, reaching up and out to find sunlight to help them grow.*

*Perhaps that's what meant in 1 Corinthians when it says "love believes all things and hopes all things." Love looks for the good. Like those little seedlings seeking sunlight, it strains to find the best, the sunlight in others.*

*But of course there's a trick. In order to see the best in others, we have to be able to see it in ourselves. Unfortunately, many of us tend to go to the negative first, the faults first, the flaws first. We forget that we are made in the image of the divine; we are made of God. Each of us at our core is holy and loveable and full of sunlight. There is a reason that the Bible says, "love your neighbor AS yourself." Like the sunlight for those little seeds and seedlings, love is about finding the good in ourselves and our neighbor; it is about finding our source of life and being.*  
(1)

So seeds and seedlings need light. We also seek light in ourselves and in others. We seek that light in the midst of so much of what is happening in our lives and in our world right now. The light of Truth. The light of Justice. The light to expose racial Injustice has. The light of love.

What else can the redwoods and their seeds teach us?

I remember the first time I visited the redwood trees and how I was awestruck. When I was growing up, our family went to Sequoia National Park. I still remember the first time I saw those trees and smelled that redwood scent. I had a lump in my throat and tears in my eyes. There is some deep mystery there. More recently Jeffrey and I have gone to Armstrong Woods in Northern California. We have been able to go there in the early morning when it is quiet and we don't see other people. It is a sacred in place.

Many writers have reflected on the power and beauty of the redwood trees. It does begin with the seeds. Morton Kelsey, a gifted leader of contemplative Christianity, wrote a book a few years ago called *Prayer and the Redwood Seed*. Here are some of his reflections.

Awed and quiet within a grove of giant redwoods, I pause  
reflecting.

In my hand I hold a tiny seed, a redwood seed.

It lies inert upon my wrinkled palm.

Several thousand do not weigh an ounce.

A gust of wind could carry it away....

So many thousands fall to the ground and perish.

They fall upon the rocky soil and do not  
germinate.

They spring up and are devoured by hungry  
forest creatures.

They are so fragile and powerless.

I wonder how these seeds can give birth  
to a living cathedral like this in which I stand.

Gigantic buttresses of wood and bark  
support great tapering columns arching  
overhead,

filtering a stream of soft light  
upon carpets of ferns and fallen twigs.

I feel as tiny as the seed I hold.

.....

I gaze upon that tiny seed and the charred and  
splintered ruins

of once noble trees.

And then I look up into the magnificent redwoods  
surrounding me,

laughing and dancing in the breeze.

How grand and powerful they are

And yet they issued from a small grain of life  
like that lying on my hand

or else they sprang from death and devastation.

I am amazed, awed and filled with wonder. (2)

What else can we learn?

We can certainly learn patience from redwoods and their seeds. Redwoods are the tallest living things on earth and can live up to 2,000 years, yet they started as a seed no bigger than a tomato seed. It takes patience and endurance for that small seed to grow to become a magnificent Redwood.

One of the most unusual things about Redwoods are their pine cones with the seeds inside. Redwoods need heat and light. Fire opens up their cones that are usually glued shut by resin. When their cones are opened, they are able to drop their seeds and bring about new growth.

Maybe fire symbolizes challenge, getting outside our comfort zone, letting go of a hard outer shell, being transformed. This happens for individuals and communities of people. Inner and outer transformation. Maybe heat and light for redwoods are times we are uncomfortable and can challenge ourselves, to change, grow, and bring about rebirth and renewal.

Sometimes it feels like that is what is happening in the midst of these waves of upheaval in our world right now, in the midst of the coronavirus and protests regarding racial injustice. This is a season of heat and light when things are breaking open.

I think we are called to plant seeds of life and hope and truth and beauty when we see other people planting great crops of fear and hate and untruths.

We are called to be open and awake. Let's be sure to also be looking for ways the Spirit is moving and trusting in a new life. Maybe we can see that the world at the beginning of birth pangs.

Let's use these days to plant seeds of hope in the world. Let us be seed planters. Let us keep the vision that from very small seeds giant majestic redwoods can grow. We need that larger vision of the Beloved Community more than ever. Amen.

1) Rev. Susan Sparks, "Three Redwood Wishes," Day1.org posted 12/8/17

[https://day1.org/articles/5d9b820ef71918cdf20041ec/susan\\_sparks\\_three\\_redwood\\_wishes](https://day1.org/articles/5d9b820ef71918cdf20041ec/susan_sparks_three_redwood_wishes)

2) Morton Kelsey, *Prayer and The Redwood Seed*, 1991. Rockport, Mass.: Element, pp.1-3.