

Sermon preached by Tom Haynes
St. Elizabeth's, Culver
June 14, 2009
Second Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

Psalm 20

2 Corinthians 5:6-10, (11-13), 14-17

Mark 4:26-34

“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be an acceptable offering in your sight, Oh Lord, my strength and my redeemer.”

I will start this morning by making the observation that faith is a funny thing. Even the most angry atheist typically has faith in the laws of physics. When it comes right down to it, many of us don't really understand what is happening when we flip a light switch. We have every expectation though that the lights will come on, and don't have to appreciate the details of electrons and the design of light bulbs. We don't give it much thought, but most of us have faith in many things.

In a motorcycling magazine once the tech editor said in an article that “Electrons are not ham sandwiches.” I have often laughed about this because we believe in electrons, and we rely on them in a variety of ways, but we can't hold them or turn them over to see where they are made. This does not mean that electrons do not exist. We BELIEVE in electrons. It just so happens that it is not so fashionable these days to have faith in God, but faith is faith.

You will remember I ran from the coffee hour last week to Final Formation at the Academies. Those of you who have been there understand the humbling experience. These are students who are teetering on the edges of their adult lives. They are capable and bright. Most of them are fairly charming, and they have enormous potential for growth and leadership.

Teachers, parents, grandparents, and coaches all have a tremendous impact on the lives of these students, and in one of those things we see potential at Final Formation. We have no clue really where they are headed. We have a concern for the future and an adult awareness of all the hazards out there. There are plenty of reasons we cry sometimes at events like Final Formation.

As I read today's Scripture, I can really identify with Jesus the teacher speaking in parables. He says things the disciples don't really understand or appreciate. As a high school teacher who has spent a majority of his career teaching Algebra 1, I can really relate. I say things all the time which do not seem to sink in or be appreciated.

I can just imagine the blank looks as the disciples are thinking “Oh please, why can't He just tell us what we need to know?” St. Peter has his hand up to ask “Is this going to be on the test?” I can just see Jesus thinking to Himself, “OK, I have to use another example to drive this home. Maybe the image of a tree will make more sense. It is too bad that I

don't have a chalkboard here. A picture always helps.”

Jesus of course draws a verbal picture for the disciples in today's Gospel, and the mustard seed image is an appropriate one for Final Formation. We see these students as great things just as they are about to grow. I love the image of the mustard seed and the tree it becomes.

I am going to run with the student/teacher thread for a minute so bear with me. A hazard for us is that we often can't trust our instincts. Samuel was not inclined to pick David to replace Saul, and the Lord has to remind the prophet “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.”

I am on Facebook, and I have reconnected with many of my students from the 1980's when I was teaching in Tennessee. This is one of these things where I was teaching these students 25 years ago when they were 14. Now these former students are looking hard at 40 and have 14 year old children of their own.

I talked about how Final Formation at the Academies as a humbling experience. I am truly blessed by the chances I have had to work with this students. I am doubly blessed by reconnecting with students I taught in the 1980's. I get to see how well they have all turned out.

I can really identify with the prophet in today's reading from 1 Samuel, because I am not inclined to be good at predicting who will succeed and who won't. In all honesty, I think I am better than most in my assessment of long range prospects. “Better than most” still may not be very good.

Now you may be thinking that the only kids who track down former teachers are the ones who have done well. There is some truth to this observation. The point is though that none of us are very good at looking into the crystal ball and seeing the future. We predict mediocrity for the person who is successful. We also predict success for those who don't seem to do much. You want to be scared? Look in a high school annual from 1990 or so and see who was “Most Likely to Succeed.” The person may be “most likely to be downsized” and looking for work in this economy.

The next observation I want to make is that the things we think are important now may not be very important down the road. The most dramatic examples of this may be for those very people teetering on the brink of adulthood. Students can be absolutely obsessed with something. Some stupid detail can be very important when you are a high school senior. The world depends on the shoes you wear to the Officer's Figure. Give it 20 years, and no one really cares. GPA may be one of these examples, and for those of us who had a great time and made a bunch of B's as undergraduates, it is probably fortunate that GPA is not so important these days.

The reading from Corinthians reminds us that things change. We are not static, and we grow as individuals. We grow in relationships. We grow in the faith. Paul writes “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” Our perspective changes, and we see the old things in a new way. As Christians we have a new perspective.

There is nothing like going back to your alma mater after a few years to have fresh eyes

for everything. Suddenly we see forest and not trees. We appreciate people we may have resented when we were 16. So how does this work? That is a great question, and suddenly we are back to today's Gospel.

Now there is a mysterious quality in all this. Electrons are not ham sandwiches after all. Faith really is a funny thing. The Gospel tells us "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how." We don't have to understand how it works. We have to know that it does, do our part and get out of the way.

I have to say that there is a lot I don't understand about teaching. I know a thing or two about it though. Today's Gospel has some insight for each of us as teachers. We do the best we know how and then "sleep and rise night and day." The work we have done will take root, and sprout/grow. Not only do we not need to know how it all works, the Gospel tells us we won't. The seed grows and we do not "know how."

So where do we go with all this? We are poor judges of potential. We don't know how it all works. The things we think are important are often inconsequential as we look back.

The takeaways are these. First we are called to spread the Gospel. We are the sowers who spread the seeds. We spread the Gospel through our witness to God's grace and power in transforming our lives. We don't need to understand how it works, and we are not called to understand it. We are called to do it.

Second, if left to our own devices, we would probably not make good decisions. We have to have faith in God's plan. This is a huge step for some people, and it is a challenge for any of us sometimes. We want to know where we are headed, and we want to be the masters of our own destiny. This idea that we are in control is important to American culture, and I am telling you to be counter-cultural here.

Finally we may never understand the impact we have now, and our actions may have a huge influence in the lives of others. This is a burden in some ways, and it is a grace. This is a responsibility we need to be mindful of. We have a duty and we answer God's call in our dealings with people. To make it tough, we can't understand the consequences of our actions. We make an impact either way. For sure we can't let ourselves be discouraged by what may seem like a lack of progress.

So we act on faith, and we spread the Gospel. We trust in God to provide the growth.

Here are the challenges I am leaving with you. I am going to tell you what this looks like lived.

We need to practice our faith. We need to be kind to people. We do what we know is right. We invite people to church and talk to them about our faith. That is it. It is easier to say than it is to do, and I will own the fact that it is pretty easy to stand up here and make it sound simple. The details can be messy, and God knows we won't be perfect.

We have an awesome responsibility. We are walking witnesses to God's love, and small things now can have a huge impact later. The mission field starts when we step out the door. God bless each of you as you respond to His call.

*I have said these words in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen*