

Steeple Stories

The newsletter of North Shore Baptist Church

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Lent, Parables, and the Challenge of God's Kingdom

He 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)

The familiarity of the images in this well-known piece of Scripture perhaps obscure the fact that this parable is odd. Mustard seeds do not grow into trees. Mustard seeds grow into small herb bushes. "The greatest of shrubs" (a better translation, "the greatest of vegetables") is perhaps closer to what one might expect could grow out of a mustard seed, but it is still a rather bizarre distinction to achieve. So what is going on here?



Ashley Whitaker facilitates personal reflection through prayer stations during the Ash Wednesday service

At our youth retreat over President's Day weekend, we discussed how we might be like the mustard seed. We reflected on times in our lives when we were underestimated for being young or small, and thought about how we might surprise others with what we can do for the kingdom of God.

I know I was surprised last year when the youth asked me if they could cook for themselves, instead of having someone else cook for them. And I continue to marvel

at how they organize themselves, shape the menu, and execute meals that are fragrant and tasty like mustard seeds.

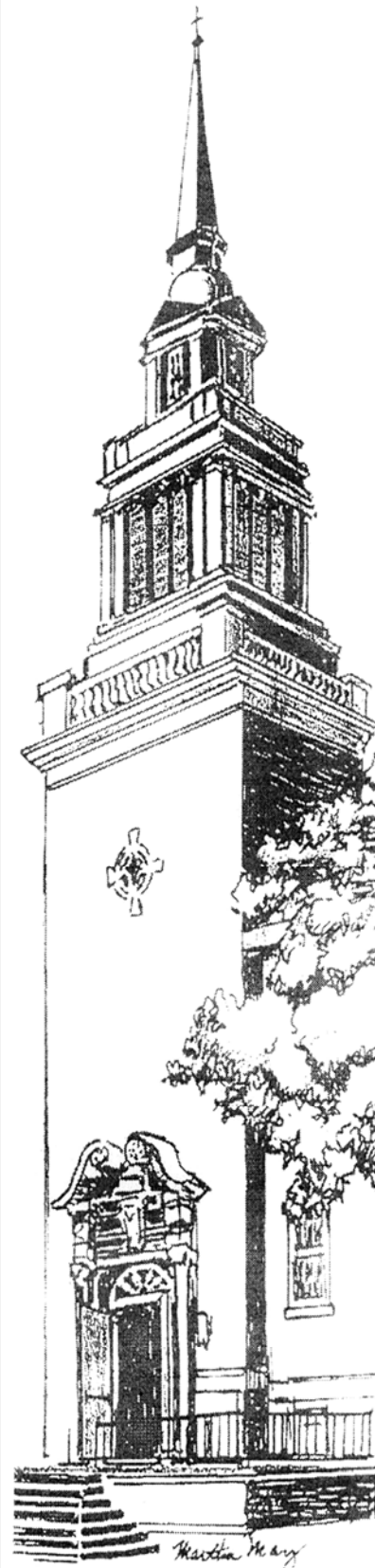
In parables, unusual things happen. A merchant sells everything he has to purchase a single pearl. A father throws a party for a prodigal son who has returned, but somehow forgets to send an invitation to his other son. And mustard seeds grow into trees. Unexpected twists and hyperbole are par for the course in parables. This is because the genre is designed to provoke us to think. How do we live out and live into the kingdom of God, if we imagine it to be a mustard seed that grows into a tree?

According to Paul's letter to the Romans, "The kingdom of God is...justice, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (14:17)." This is a beautiful vision, but it requires a good deal of work to figure out what that means for us from day to day. What does justice look like in our context? How do we find peace in the midst of turmoil? How can we be agents of joy in a roiling sea of anger?

This is where parables can help us. They challenge us

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to reframe our vision and reconsider situations in our daily lives that we might take for granted. According to Dr. AJ Levine, professor of New Testament at Vanderbilt Divinity School, parables “challenge us to look into the hidden aspects of our own values, our own lives. They bring to the surface unasked questions, and they reveal the answers we have always known, but refuse to acknowledge.”

We are entering the season of Lent on the Christian calendar, which is a period of time in which we are invited to explore new pathways by which we might walk more deeply into the heart of God. During this season, I am teaching a Sunday School class in which we will explore Jesus’ parables and identify the questions they lead us to ask and the values they reveal within us. Whether you are participating in this class or not, I invite you to seek out the challenge of the kingdom of God in your daily life this season. What might God be inviting you to pay closer attention to? Where have seeds been planted in your life that might be growing into something you did not expect? What tiny kernel has gotten stuck in your shoe, continuing to irritate you until you stop moving, pull it out, and see exactly what it is?

In little ways and big, how are you being challenged to live more deeply into a reign of justice, peace, and joy?

~ Pastor Kathryn

¹ Levine, Amy-Jill. Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), p. 3.

Reflections on MLK Teach-In Workshops

The newly formed Social Justice Task Force members squared their shoulders with a sense of accomplishment at the conclusion of the six-week workshop series, “Towards Justice and Human Rights” in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr. The final workshop on February 23rd drew record attendance for a presentation by WBEZ’s South Side Reporter, **Natalie Moore**. Ms. Moore sat without notes and intrigued the audience with a synopsis of her book, “A Portrait of Chicago and American Segregation”. She spoke of the segregated pattern in housing and the cost of goods and services. Besides the standard statistics, she gave examples of her own home sale and her own comparison shopping for personal items. Discussions emerged as to how housing is related to schools, businesses, jobs, and politics; during the exchange of questions and answers with Natalie Moore.



Natalie Moore leads a conversation around housing segregation in Chicago

Smiles remained from the previous session of merriment but yet inflaming thought in the “Economic Justice Simulation Game. The game was facilitated by **Jay Larson** and **Sean Shell** of NSBC. Participants planned budgets around small allotments, but they were interrupted by unforeseen incidents dramatized by **Madison McClendon** and **Courtney Feiler**. The elements of surprise, hilarity, and brain-teasing produced some gems of wisdom, useful in balancing household budgets and maybe even church budgets.

The Task Force broke the weekly sequence of workshops on February 9th for the Agape Feast, which followed our quarterly unity service. The word, “Agape” means love in Greek. It is related to the fellowship meals in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. One scripture that sums up the meaning of the Agape Feast is Deuteronomy 12:7 “ And you shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your households together, rejoicing in all the undertakings in which the Lord your God has blessed you.” Love was put in action when **Pastor Michael Ware** explained that there was no order in how the food would be served. He asked everyone to create their own order. Everyone did, including small children and babies. One two-year-old showed the spirit of it all when

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What's Up With Our Youth?



At the end of January, the youth group joined up with the Hispanic congregation for a night of food, fellowship, and games.

In February, 17 youth and 3 adults went on retreat over President's Day weekend to Camp Tamarack in Waupaca, WI. We hiked through knee-high snow, gathered around the fire, sang songs, played games, and learned about the parables of Jesus. At the end of the weekend, we wrote our own parables. As one youth wrote, "the kingdom of God is like a fresh-squeezed lemonade on a hot day." Thank you to **Yanira Silva** and **Lisbeth Monge**, who accompanied the trip.



We continue to meet weekly on Friday evenings for dinner, singing, and fellowship. Thank you to **Naw Ta Kaw Paw**, who has been cooking meals for us, and our driver, **Lázaro Silva**.

Above & Center: The Hispanic Congregation's Family Game Night, over 30 people from 3 different congregations gathered for food, Jenga, Uno, and Bananagrams in English and Spanish.

Right: Most of the youth were willing to brave the weather to go hiking in the woods.



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he sat alone at a table as his family members gathered food. Differing from his usual vocal style, he smiled and waved his arms, entertaining himself peacefully until his seat mates returned.

Continuing the retrospective tour of the workshops, on February 2nd, we gathered information that will enable us to use greater wisdom in the voting process. **Anna Gaebler** of ONE Northside explained the Progressive Income Tax to us. We learned how the proposed tax will be income based, rather than tax with the same percentage for all. The progressive tax will increase budgets for schools and social services as well as decrease taxes for the working poor. After the workshop, many expressed interest in following up on this concept, and made oral commitments to inform others for the coming elections.

Martin Luther King Jr. was in Puerto Rico. Most of us were astounded to learn of the travels of the civil rights leader to this U.S. Territory. On January 26th, **Pastor Juan Angel Gutierrez Rodriguez** unveiled the little-known facts to us in his discourse on "Martin Luther King, Jr., Puerto Rico, and Colonialism". He contends that King's first public announcement about his position on the Viet Nam war was in Puerto Rico. We are grateful that he shared this valuable research with us and look forward to his soon to be published book on the topic.

~ Dr. Peggy Ann Griffen



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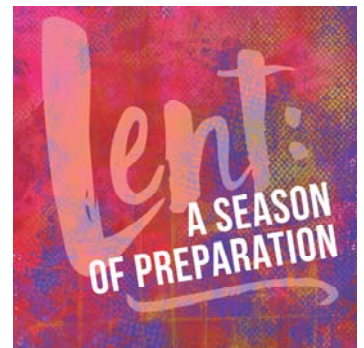
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North Shore Baptist Church

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"Wherever you go, no matter what the weather, always bring your own sunshine." - Anthony J. D'Angelo

Day of Remembrance 2020

Day of Remembrance 2020 (February 16) featured "Alternative Facts: The Lies of Executive Order 9066", one hour film directed by Jon Osaki and Megumi Nishikura. The film exposes the lies which eventually forced



120,000 Japanese Americans to be detained in internment camps during WWII as well as including interviews with the family members of the prominent politicians and those who were actively involved in the redress movement in the 1980s. After screening of the film, Q and A session was held and the film maker examined the current climate of fear and racism towards immigrant communities. He also encouraged the audience to participate in "Tsuru for Solidarity," a nonviolent, direct action project of Japanese American social justice advocates.

~ Pastor Yuki

If you would like to receive *Steeple Stories* by e-mail (in color!), contact us at office@northshorebaptist.org