

**Ezekiel 17:22-24; 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17; Mark 4:26-34**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost B; 06.16.24; G. Miles Smith+**

Sometimes if I woke up very early...I could hear him in the kitchen making his breakfast. I seem to recall that he got up about 4am and would be gone long before we got up for school. “Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds”—these words by the ancient Greek historian Herodotus would later be applied to Postal Service carriers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. And that is what my father did until he retired. He was proud to wear the uniform—back when they wore the uniform--because he felt like he was providing an important public service which gave him an opportunity to be helpful to the people he served on his mail route. And yet...his work made him largely invisible to *me*. By the time he came home, it had already been a long day for him...and he often fell asleep in his chair soon after supper. There just was not enough time.

My father had a 10<sup>th</sup> grade education back in the day when that was the best that many Virginians could receive. And then he set out for work by going to Baltimore Maryland where he joined over 50,000 men and women in the Glenn L. Martin airplane factory where they were churning out bombers for World War II. That’s where he met my mother—on the assembly line. After the war, they married and moved to North Carolina where my mother’s family was. My father’s work life continued for the rest of his life in various blue collar work until he found his way into the Postal Service. I was the first in our large extended family to graduate from college except for one mysterious uncle who worked in Oak Ridge Tennessee. I had the sense that my father felt like he could have done more with his life--but he never had the chance, needing to work to attend to family responsibilities. But there were signs: he kept a large short wave radio in our home which to me as a child was like a mystical portal into another world. He proudly kept a box of classical music records despite the fact that he mostly listened to country and gospel music and would eventually make a pilgrimage with my mother to Graceland. And he made a considerable financial investment in those days by getting the multi-volume World Book Encyclopedia at home for us to help us with school but he liked to just read them himself. If he had been born in a different and later time than 1922 then I wonder what he would have become.

My father loved talking to people. We used to kid him...and we sometimes got frustrated...that wherever we went...he would find someone to talk to. But he did not quite seem to know how to talk to *me*...he seemed to be more comfortable trying to give me advice. And I probably was not good at having a conversation with him either at the time. I often wonder about so many things we could talk about now. So that is one of those unresolved issues with my father, where in a sense, I never quite got to know him as...*Herman*...but mostly only as my *father*. [If he had lived to today he would be 102.]

But I am grateful about this: He was surprisingly supportive of me--in the late 60s and early 70s—a time of national social and cultural upheaval--when it could have easily been so very different. He was still wearing a suit, tie, and a fedora to church—and there I was casually dressed with my hair getting longer and longer. He would even say to others...that he respected my freedom to do so...because I was a good kid and I was trying my best at school and I was going to church with him and what more could a father want? And so, even in all his unavoidable invisibility in my life, and his own limitations, and my own, he did create a home of hospitality...for me and my sisters...and he sheltered us...in the shade of his hospitality...and his hard work. And I will always love him for all that. |

Maybe all of us have some kind of complex legacy from our fathers. I name my experience...partly as a tribute to my father today on Father’s Day...and also in the spirit of telling my truth...so you may be reminded of your own truth. And I also want to be mindful...of my own fatherhood...to my son...and a legacy there which I have not yet finished. |

But I am also speaking of my father today...because there is some similarity in my experience of my father... and my experience of the Fatherhood of God...which I have come to know through Jesus. And

when I speak of the Fatherhood of God--I am not thinking about God's *gender*--but *a character quality of God*, you might say. I am thinking about God's *hospitality and embrace*...as I have experienced in Jesus...and in the Church at its best...which has informed both my expectations of what Church can and should be like...and what kind of priest and religious "Father", I seek to be. |

And one of the sources of that vision of God...is in a biblical image...of a sheltering plant...of a great many branches. This image takes one form in the old testament reading today from Ezekiel where God's hospitality and embrace is imagined as a *great cedar tree* where "winged creatures of every kind" could... "nest in its shade". Then in the gospel reading today, Jesus hearkened back to this venerable image of God's hospitality--but added a curious twist. Jesus likened the hospitality of the Father...not to a great *tree*...but to a Mustard *bush*--"the greatest of all *shrubs*". It seems anticlimactic--the Church aspiring to God's Kingdom...by seeking to be a...*shrub* of hospitality?! :) I cannot help but wonder...if this is one of those moments in the Bible...where if a modern writer was in charge of the text then they would have noted a wry smile on Jesus' face and a shift in his tone of voice! But we these ancient writings do not disclose such things and we are left to wonder... A "shrub" as an inspiring image of God's vision for the Church in the world?!

So let's think about this. Shrubs and cedars can grow mostly anywhere...but shrubs are plants of much smaller scale, obviously, *that can abide in many more places*. Shrubs are in a sense more *domestic, familiar, and easily companionable with human life*. In our experience shrubs are most commonly found around homes...and they can remind us of home. As I think about my father, I can also remember our very modest home surrounded by shrubs, and it was there *among the shrubs*, so to speak, that I experienced the hospitality of my father.

*I don't know where my father found his way of being so hospitable to his children*...but I wonder if *church* had something to do with it. And I do believe *Jesus* meant more to him than he talked about. And it was during a racially tense time in Charlotte that I noticed that my father had an even larger hospitality. He resisted the common cruelties of language of that place and time. He seemed to see people as individual people rather than as races or other categories.

*And far more remains a mystery to me about the hospitality of the Father of our Lord Jesus*. The hospitality that Jesus proclaimed and embodied with his disciples and in his table fellowship with sinners was remarkable and noticeable. It is such a great hospitality that we don't have to worry about falling outside of the *hospitality* of God...but we do have to be vigilant that *we do not transgress against the hospitality of God*. |

Every church cannot be a great *cedar* of God's hospitality...although I do think of Grace Church more akin to a great cedar. But every church can potentially be a *great shrub* of God's hospitality... "so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." And I think of Grace like that too. And I would not want it any other way. |

And that *shrub* of God's hospitality can also filter down into families all over the place...where hospitality is never perfect...but it can still be very real.

And that hospitality of God can be passed along into individual lives...spreading about like... *shrubs*...all over the place!