

POTENTIALITIES

Preached by The Rev. Ruth E. Shaver at The United Church of Schellsburg, June 18, 2006

Second Sunday After Pentecost

Ezekiel 17:22-24

Mark 4:21-34

When I was in grade school, I remember learning about the two different kinds of energy. There's kinetic energy, which is the energy of an object in motion. Then there's potential energy, which is the amount of energy stored within an object at rest that can be converted into other kinds of energy when the object is set in motion. Think about a boulder at the top of a hill. While it's at rest, all of its energy is potential – the bigger the boulder and the higher the hill, the more potential energy, because potential energy is a function of mass and gravity. When the boulder is pushed down the hill, the potential energy is converted to kinetic energy, a function of mass, gravity, and velocity. Woe betide the man or woman in the path of a big rolling boulder, right? Potential energy converted to kinetic energy affects a change on the object and quite often the world around, as well.

While some people would look at the top of the hill and see a boulder, others would look and see a neat thing to play or experiment with. God saw the potential energy in the sprig at the top of the cedar tree in Ezekiel's vision and promised that he would convert the potential energy of that tiny branch into the kinetic energy of a large, healthy tree to provide fruit and to shelter birds – and to show the glory of the Lord in the process. The potential energy in the boulder is always there, the potential energy of that sprig is always there – but not everyone sees it. Just so, the potential energy of Jesus' parables is always there. Jesus speaks to his crowds in parables because, like that boulder perched at the top of the hill and that sprig at the top of the cedar tree, parables have potential energy that can be converted into kinetic energy to affect a change on the person who understands the parable and thus a change on the world around.

Let's look at the parable of the light first. Jesus makes a valid point: why would anyone waste precious oil to light a lamp, then hide it away where no one will see it? That point is the boulder or the sprig. The potential energy of the story is in our understanding of the story, which he alludes to in the following verses. "Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you. For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." Jesus isn't talking about the amount of oil in the lamp or the number of lamps, or for that matter, how big the boulder is or how high the sprig is off the ground; he's talking about having the courage to stand as an individual for one's own beliefs in the face of tremendous opposition, casting a light so bright that there are no shadows to fear. This is precisely what Jesus, who is the "Light of the world", does in his ministry, so not only is he teaching those who have ears to hear what to do, he is modeling that very behavior in every moment of his life. He shows in every action how to convert potential energy into kinetic energy.

Let your light shine such that there is no darkness. How do we learn to see the potential energy in our lives, to convert it to kinetic energy and affect a change in ourselves and in the world? What potential do we have to be such a light in our world to bring about God's kingdom "soon and very soon"?

Jesus, being the gifted teacher he is, uses another story to illustrate a similar point. What is a seed but a little bundle of potential energy? Set in motion by the sower, who puts the seed on the ground, and given optimal conditions of water, sun, and nutrients, the seed will sprout and grow into a healthy plant that could be for food, for beauty, for household use, for fuel, for shade . . . Whatever the case, the plant affects a change. The story is just a story about the way the world works until you find the potential energy inside of it, there being a lovely play on the theme of potentiality between the seed that grows and the actual lesson Jesus imparts to those who have ears to hear.

A seed at rest, say sitting on a shelf or in a farmer's seed bin, serves no purpose. A seed in motion, that is, a seed that is growing, becomes something useful and important in the world. Likewise, a believer at rest is just potential energy, while a believer in motion is affecting change on himself and in the world because God has planted him in the soil to set him in motion. The kinetic energy of believers in motion helps to bring the coming of God's kingdom ever closer, "soon and very soon".

And what of the mustard seed, that tiniest of seeds that when planted becomes the greatest of all shrubs, with branches for the birds of the air to make their nests in? We've all heard the axiom about having faith the size of a mustard seed. Now think about it: if we could measure faith in that way, what does this parable teach us about potential energy when it is converted into kinetic energy? The potential energy of faith the size of a mustard seed far exceeds any ability of human physics to calculate if the illustration Jesus uses here is any indication.

You see, size doesn't matter in the Kingdom of God. Whether we could be likened to a boulder, a cedar sprig, a lamp, or a seed, we are all, to quote one of my favorite kids' songs, "a great big bundle of potentiality!" When God touches us and sets us in motion, there is no stopping us, for we will be changed and we will affect change in our world to bring about God's kingdom on earth "soon and very soon."

As we prepare for our communion service in a few moments, I'd like you to think about these questions:

Where are you in motion for God in your life?

Where are you at rest in your life, waiting for God to set you in motion?

Who in your life can help you discover new places where there is potential for God to set you in motion?

It's great to be a "great big bundle of potentiality!" But it's even better to be a believer in motion, affecting change in our lives and in the world so that the kingdom will indeed come "soon and very soon".