

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

June 17, 2018

IV Pentecost, Mark 4:26-34

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. Amen.

Good morning! And happy Father's Day.

As we remember our dads or as our families celebrate our own fatherhood, I hope our experience of paternal love differs from that described in *State of Play*, a series of HBO documentaries exploring contemporary American sports. The first of these films, entitled "Trophy Kids," tells the story of four parents committed to raising superstar athletes. Among these families, we first meet eight-year-old Amari driving a golf ball off the tee and onto a lush, green fairway. She turns happy, chubby cheeks toward her father, Andre, who, from off-camera, complains at the child: "You're not focused! Why do we even practice? Why do I pay \$150-an-hour for a swing coach if you're going to hit it that short?" Andre storms away, cursing at himself (though within easy earshot of his young child), and Amari hangs her head as she walks toward her ball.

There is a cutaway in the film to an earlier interview, and we hear Andre explain, "Number one on the LPGA tour: *that's* our goal."ⁱ

We then meet Steve, sitting alone in a section of wooden bleachers. In his early forties, Steve's sun-cured skin is the now color of tomato basil soup. His shoulders suggest the build of a former weight lifter, and he bleaches his bangs, which he styles to stand straight up. His face turns purple as he screams at his son, Derek, who hits a three-pointer while playing in an AAU basketball game: "That's not good enough! All wrong, all wrong! Your form is *all wrong!*"

Steve then narrates to the camera his own professional successes as a young man, explaining that he operated nine businesses and employed "80 or 90 people" when Derek was born, but, since then, he has not worked a single day: "A four-year Division I scholarship, *that's* our goal. I am completely committed to that goal, and I will do whatever it takes. I've already invested two Lamborghinis in Derek. I am out here with him every day. That's how much I love my son."

The film then cuts to a private gym, where thirteen-year-old Derek works with a personal trainer to increase his vertical jump. The exercise itself looks torturous, forcing the boy to jump repeatedly with elastic straps attached to his ankles, yanking him back to the floor each time he leaps. "I give Derek twenty-five, twenty-six pills every day. I mix Creatine in everything he eats. I am hoping with a little bit of this and a little bit of that, he will make it to 6'4"."ⁱⁱ

Number one on the LPGA tour...a Division One scholarship. While Andre and Steve prove awfully easy targets on this Father's Day, the hyperbolic character of their stories invites us to ask ourselves: For what are *we* preparing? And how are we preparing for it?

While I hope “The Reign of God” makes the list of our top priorities – you know, Top 10, maybe Top 12 – like those aspirations of Andre and Steve, the scale of that dream intimidates me. Fortunately, in this morning’s Gospel appointment Jesus offers some relief to my kingdom anxiety with his two parables about seeds. In the first parable, Jesus announces, “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.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In this illustration, the kingdom comes *imperceptibly*, an observation that resonates with my experience of charting most growths. Even the fastest growing children and weeds grow more slowly than we can observe. Sure, we can track their height on a kitchen doorframe – “Mary Virginia, three years...seven years...eleven years” – or, with some annoyance, monitor from a kitchen window as the latter overtake our garden, but we can’t actually *see* the growing as it happens. Yet, from the signs we *can* observe – discovering on Sunday morning that yet another pair of shoes doesn’t fit – we know that they are...*growing*...or, in the setting of God’s reign...*coming*.

Further, in this illustration the kingdom comes *mysteriously*: “he does not know how,” the teaching concludes. Man, I feel such relief that I don’t have to understand all mysteries in order for the Divine purpose to be achieved! See, contradicting the efforts of Andre and Steve who seek to *compel* their children’s greatness, the mechanics of the kingdom’s arrival prove inscrutable. Now, I certainly do not believe Jesus’ teaching absolves us from advancing the kingdom as we can – and, likewise, neither do I suggest that parents should exempt themselves from guiding their children’s development – but with this promise, we who seek the reign of God need only focus on what we can contribute *in this moment*...and then the next one...and then the next one...rather than obsessing about what God and our collective efforts will ultimately accomplish.

Jesus’ second seed parable reiterates the themes of the first and further announces that the kingdom comes *surprisingly*. He continues, “[The Kingdom of God] is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs,^{iv} and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”^v

Who could imagine a seed so small could become a tree so grand! More than a tired cliché about small packages, Jesus announces the nearing reign as far grander than we can either expect or imagine, even when the process of its achievement remains modest – perhaps *especially* when the process of working toward its achievement seems so modest.

While we immediately, even viscerally challenge the “Trophy Kids” ethos, sociologist Malcom Gladwell affirms an incrementalist ethic in his study, *Outliers: The Story of Success*.^{vi} Gladwell offers the “10,000-Hour Rule” which proposes that one must commit 10,000 hours of dedicated practice in order to achieve high-level proficiency in a given pursuit. He offers the catchy example of The Beatles, who played 1,200 shows in Hamburg, Germany between 1960 and 1964, an experience providing the requisite 10,000 hours for their base competency, out of which their genius could develop. Not long thereafter, in 1968, a thirteen-year-old Bill Gates began his commitment of 10,000 programming hours at the keyboard of his high school’s computer, establishing the necessary baseline out of which his own artistry could grow.

However, since the publication of Gladwell’s popular work a decade ago, other sociologists have challenged his claims about the efficacy of practice alone as a predictor of proficiency. A 2014 paper “compiling 88 studies across a wide range of skills [estimates] that practice time explains [only about 26 percent of the difference in performance in games (like chess); 21% in music; and 18% for sports].^{vii} In academics, the number is much lower – 4 percent – in part because it’s hard to assess the effect of previous knowledge... [Moreover, contributors] like grit, motivation, and inspiration – that ability to imagine achieving [a] high level” – along with “personality[(although partly genetic), are all] enormous variable[s].”^{viii}

Though the peculiar alchemy of achievement may vary depending upon which expert one trusts, I read in the sum of the science a resonance with Jesus’ encouragement to focus our efforts on process, rather than on results, whether in faith or otherwise. To use Gladwell’s example, Paul, John, George, and Ringo, did not set out to become “The Beatles.” Indeed, nothing like the movement they would create had ever existed before. Rather, each night, they simply sought *to rock*, or to rock that one crowd at that one show, or to rock that one song they had practiced until their fingers bled. Similarly, young William Gates did not set out to become a personal-computing magnate. Rather, he sought to solve one coding problem after another and to explore one digital possibility after another...and another...and another.

Surely Gates and The Beatles had dreams, but before they dedicated themselves to their highest aspirations, they, more simply, committed themselves to the task immediately before them. Combined with their innate gifts and particular imaginations, those smaller tasks comprised the process for making possible their grandest successes.

For us as Christians, then, we commit ourselves to a kingdom that comes imperceptibly and mysteriously, slowly and then surprisingly, and we demonstrate our commitment with unique blends of nature and nurture, personality and practice, imagination and grit. Though we can neither hasten nor halt the arrival of God’s reign, we faithfully advance that kingdom as we can, trusting that collectively – in God’s time – our progresses will contribute to a grand fulfillment.^{ix}

That this kingdom would come.
Amen.

ⁱ *State of Play: Trophy Kids*. Bell, Chris, Director. HBO Films. 2013.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark 4:26-27

^{iv} This “greatest of all shrubs” claim has always reminded me of *Sixteen Candles* and Anthony Michael Hall’s character’s claim to be “kinda like the king of the [geeks].”

^v Mark 4:31-32

^{vi} Gladwell, Malcom. *Outliers: The Story of Success*. New York: Little Brown and Co, 2008.

^{vii} Macnamara, Brooke N, et al. “[Deliberate Practice and Performance in Music, Games, Sports, Education, and Professions: A Meta-Analysis](#).” July 1, 2014.

^{viii} Carey, Benedict. “[How Do You Get Into Carnegie Hall? Talent](#).” The New York Times. July 14, 2014.

^{ix} At the Communion Café service, I continued:

“...so, that’s the moral of the sermon: covenanting to process before results, Jesus encouraging our constancy in matters small, in order to achieve the spectacular in matters grand. Duly noted, I offer a homiletical epilogue concerning Gladwell’s signal: *hours*.

“There are roughly 8,760 hours in one year. Of those, let’s be aggressive about the potential pool for our preparation, and let’s say we sleep an average of eight hours each night: we may not actually sleep them all, but let’s estimate that we spend about that much time in bed. We would then have 5,912 waking hours available to assign. Of those, however, we have to eat. Let’s say we spend an average of two hours every day eating. That number will include time spent grocery store shopping, on the one (speedy) hand, and waiting in line for our barbeque at Franklin’s, on the other (imperceptibly slow hand). Now we’re down to 5,182 hours/year that we can commit to preparation for our success. However, we have to shower and get dressed and tend to ourselves, and we have to keep our house reasonably clean, and all of that will take time, conservatively another two hours every day, leaving us with 4,452 hours for our success preparation. And, if we seek to maintain gainful employment in order to fund our highest aspirations, those responsibilities will take – conservatively, including travel – ten hours a day, five days a week, leaving us with 1,852 available hours...

“I could keep going, but even this incomplete survey makes clear that hours are a precious resource, and dedicating 10,000 of them to any pursuit will take years to achieve.

“As I consider the mysteries of faith, the Church, and its liturgies, I take comfort in realizing how many years my spiritual Fitbit will require to meet its goals. Let’s say we are an absolute worship rockstar and attend church 48 Sundays every year. Now, I gotta tell you: nobody here is attending church 48 Sundays in a year, but we will be generous and add to that number a Christmas Eve service, three weddings, six funerals a year, for a generous total of 58 instances of church every year. And let’s give ourselves credit for two hours of church for those 58 instances, because on our way to church we’re thinking about church, which is almost like praying, and on our way home from church, we’re thinking about what we just did, and that’s even more like praying, and, in any case sometimes the preacher goes long. So, that’s 116 hours of church every year. In order to achieve Gladwell’s 10,000-hour rule, our “high-level” proficiency will require 86.2 years of church-going.

“Therefore, if you or I have ever felt lost in worship, uncertain in faith, or ambivalent about the return on our Church investments, let us take heart that proficiency yet awaits us...just a few more decades in our future.”