



**SAINT JAMES'**  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
Fremont, California

**SERMON**

14 June, 2009. Pentecost 2, Proper 6

Title: “. . . But I Must Warn You!”

Text: St. Mark 4:26-34

J.J.



Today’s Gospel talks about scattering seeds and growing plants . . . and this is the time of year for such things – things all around us are growing wild, so it seems. I have grown many things—tomatoes, corn, peas, cucumbers, beans—you name it, and I’ve probably tried to grow it. But I have never planted a mustard seed, nor have I ever seen a mustard seed become a tree-like shrub . . . but I can tell you that I have seen a small seed of faith grow into gigantic forest. Let me tell you the story:

It all took place several years ago, 18 to be exact, back in Chicago, at Christ Church (not it’s real name, nor are the names of the people in this story real . . . but the story is!). The parish was actually located in one of Chicago’s suburbs – where the politically liberal city meets the traditionally conservative burbs – a parish that takes pride in being a welcoming and affirming congregation, having a reputation of being open to everyone, regardless of age, or gender, or color, or national origin, or wealth or not . . . it was especially welcoming to the gay and lesbian community, which was somewhat unusual back then and in that place. The Parish had an active and somewhat aggressive hospitality committee—what some would call “Radical Hospitality”—making sure that every visitor was warmly welcomed. They had gone through the kind of “training” we plan to do here at St. James’, today, after the 10:30am service (Commercial: You can still participate in this important ministry and join us for the two-hour training). Let me tell you, the Hospitality Team at Christ Church missed no one if they could help it.

One Sunday, an older gentleman came to worship. He had come in late, avoided everyone and quickly sat down in a side pew. He prayed . . . worshipped . . . communed . . . and, after having received only the host, quickly left, not waiting for the final blessing. Now, this happened several Sundays in a row – he would come late, side-step the Greeters (who were obviously frustrated about that), sit down in an out-of-the-way place, pray, commune and leave. One Sunday, however, he lingered around just a little too long, and the Greeters “God-Squad” got him . . . and warmly welcomed him to Christ Church. His name was Jose. He told us he had been a life-long member of a neighboring congregation, but recently had been asked to leave that Church when it was discovered that he was Gay and had a partner. Recently, he had been diagnosed with a terminal cancer – the doctors gave him 6-12 months. And I must tell you, as he told his story, we were stunned and silent. Jose went on to tell us that he was looking for a new church home, but wanted to be careful. He needed and wanted pastoral care, but not at any price. He had come to Christ Church, for he had heard that we would welcome him as he was. And then he just stood there and said no more. One of our trained Greeters put an arm around him – “Welcome to Christ Church” – and Jose cried.

The very next Sunday, another man was with Jose, and they sat together. Jose introduced him as Robert, his partner of some 37 years. And . . . we warmly welcomed Robert. But Robert was a little stoic about it all . . . somewhat distant. For example, during the worship service, Robert would just sit there . . . he did not sing when we sang or speak the liturgy as we prayed. Oh, he stood when Jose stood (as if looking to Jose to take the lead), but did not kneel when Jose knelt. And when Jose went to communion, Robert just stayed behind. Now, nothing was said by any of us . . . all in due time, we thought . . . all in due time.

Well, as time went by, the illness began to take its toll. Jose’s name was added to our prayer list. And, there were some Sundays that Jose was so sick, he could not come to services . . . it was then that we and our Eucharistic Visitors started going to him, to bring him the Sacrament. When Jose and Robert were in Church, the congregation was delighted and surrounded both of them with their love and joy. But those visits became less and less as Jose’s health continued to deteriorate.

One afternoon I received a telephone call. Jose asked if I could stop by the house. He said it was important. I dropped everything and went over. Jose wanted to talk about his funeral service. He wanted his funeral to be a celebration, not a dirge, and he asked if we would sing some of his favorite hymns, mostly Easter hymns (although Easter was some 6 months away) . . . and I said, of course: We will make it an Easter Celebration, and Jose smiled. Robert also was present for this conversation, but said nothing . . . but I saw a tear come from the eye of one whom I had come to know as being rather quiet and stoic. And there was a long silence. I had brought the Sacrament with me, and I used the silence to prepare for communion. "Father," Jose said, "Father, I have one more request . . . would it be OK if Robert communed?" And again there was silence, and I looked at Robert, who was as stoic as ever. I said: "Of course. This is Christ's table. All are welcomed." And stoic Robert broke in: "But you don't understand, Father. I'm not a member of the church . . . not of any church . . . I am not even a Christian . . . I don't believe in any of your stuff . . . never have . . . never will. Oh, there might be a God out there, somewhere, someplace; but I'm not sure I even believe that anymore . . . but . . . if that's what Jose wants . . . well . . . I'll do it. And again there was silence. I turned to Robert and said: "Robert, you're welcome to commune, **but I must warn you**, like the Surgeon General of the United States, I must warn you, communing could be dangerous to your spiritual health" . . . and then all three of us laughed . . . and Robert communed.

It was not long after that . . . a week later . . . Jose died. The entire congregation turned out for the funeral, not only to say their good-byes to Jose (whom they had come to love as a brother), but also to be there to support Robert, and . . . as we all thought . . . to say their good-byes to him and bid him, what we thought would be a final farewell, thinking he had come to Church only to support Jose. Well, we could not have been more wrong. The very next Sunday Robert was in church . . . and he sat down in the very same pew he and Jose had sat in for the past four months (Robert had already "claimed" his "pew space!"). And when it came time for communion, Robert came forward . . . held out his hand for the Bread from Heaven . . . drank from the Cup of Salvation . . . and wept.

Three Christmases ago, we got a card from Robert. He has retired, at last, and had moved to Arizona. The most difficult part of leaving Chicago, he wrote, was saying goodbye to Christ Church, where he has been an active member of the Parish for some 15 years, serving as a teacher in the Sunday School, a member of the Greeters God Squad, a member of the Church Council, and President of the Congregation. Indeed, I thought, "communism can be dangerous to your spiritual health."

"The kingdom of God" we are told, "is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground . . . and the seed sprouts and grow, but we do not know how . . . it is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; and yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." Indeed!. This morning I welcome you . . . I welcome you to St. James'. Welcome to this service. Welcome to the Word. Welcome to the Lord's Table. Welcome . . . Come and worship . . . Touch, taste and see. Aah . . . **But I must warn you** . . . it can and will change you . . . even if your faith is only that of a small mustard seed. Amen.

S.D.G.

The Rev. Dr. David E. Abernethy-Deppe  
Castro Valley, California