

I'd like to tell you about my friend Frances Leete. She is, to my knowledge, still a member of the church in which I was raised, and when I was a little boy, she was the director of the cherub choir. Why the youngest choir was called the cherub choir is beyond me, because if you read about cherubs in the Bible, they're absolutely terrifying creatures, which come to think of it may be why they were called the cherub choir after all. My six year old brother was a cherub, so to speak, and at the age of three and half, I wanted to do everything he did. The cherub choir was not for three and half year olds, but undeterred, I memorized the first verse of *All Creatures of Our God and King* determined to change Mrs. Leete's mind. After hearing me sing it, she told my mother I really was too young.

And then the next morning, she called my mother and said, "Any child who wants to sing that much should be encouraged. I'll take him."

I learned a lesson then that I've been learning ever since: that actions have the power to affect profoundly how people see ourselves and the church and every aspect of life. I also learned that music is a powerful uniting force when people sing together.

I remember very little about being three and half years old, but I remember that. It was, and remains for me, an experience of the kingdom of God.

I think we sometimes think that the kingdom of God always has to be an earth-shatteringly big thing, you know, angels with trumpets blasting, clouds and fire around a glowing Jesus, earthquakes, etc.

And yet Jesus tells us it is like a mustard seed.

I won't belabor the point: tiny seed, big tree, you get the picture.

The disciples were constantly looking for something with a little more splash, a little more oomph, a little more grandness, and at every turn, Jesus confounded them with the observation that the kingdom of God breaks in unexpectedly. The kingdom of God starts small – the kingdom of God is all around us, Jesus says. The kingdom is at work within us.

I promised Walter Huff I wouldn't call him a mustard seed today. And I'm a man of my word, I won't. But look around. Little seed, big tree; you get the picture.

I do want to remember something that Walter said to us in his letter for the *Morningside Messenger* this month. After recounting the marvelous story of keynote address of Teresa Stratas at the conference he was attending, of how she electrified him with her words about the human voice and its carrying of the divine message, Walter offered this observation, "We, in every act of life, and through our singing, as long as we are here, are messengers sent for each other: to heal each other, ourselves, and to light the way - to light the way, through our song – to light the way for everyone."

When our vocation is working through Jesus Christ the kingdom of God is apt to break in.

Vocation has come in recent years to be associated, most often, with work. But it actually derives from a very different place. Vocation comes from the Latin root, *vocare* which means simply *to call*. When I officiate weddings, for instance, I always remind the bride and groom and congregation that what we're really doing is celebrating a holy calling, a vocation, into which the bride and groom are entering. It's a vocation because

the calling is to exemplify the love of Jesus Christ through marriage. The simplest acts become holy as they become the living of vocation.

Tiny seed, big tree; you get the picture.

I love Frederick Buechner's definition of vocation. He says, vocation is "that place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need."

When we're living our vocation, the tiniest acts are significant.

The kingdom of God is always around us – if we'll see it. If we'll seek it.

Jessamyn West, *Music on the Muscatatuck*. In it, we hear a portion of the story of Jess Birdwell, a devout Quaker and husband of a Quaker minister at the time of the Civil War. Birdwell lived an idyllic life on the banks of the Muscatatuck in Indiana. He has a thriving business, a loving family, a good wife. But something is missing, and soon West tells us, what is missing is music. And in the Quaker tradition, music is an idolatry, an impediment to the voice of God. As Birdwell is traveling to Philadelphia to purchase cherry trees for his nursery, he encounters a traveling organ salesman, Waldo Quigley. Quigley is a gifted salesman, with the gift of gab, as it were, and he soon has Birdwell right where he wants him. He begins talking about the organs that he sells: Payson and Clarke's, rhapsodizing about their rich, resonant sound. He cannot, of course, mimic the sound of an organ, but knowing he has a musician at heart in front of him, he improvises, singing an Irish air. West writes: "Jess said afterward that didn't have the slightest intention of making a show of himself in a B&O parlor car singing "The Old Musician and his Harp," or any other song, for that matter. But the tune was a hard thing to give the go-by; the mind already said the words, and the toe tapped the time; with the whole

body already singing it, that way, opening the mouth to let the words out seemed a mighty small matter...”

Birdwell concluded his business in Philadelphia, and remembering the card of the salesman, decides to stop into a Payson and Clarke showroom and hear the music played proper. It would only be polite, after all. And so it is that the husband of a Quaker minister finds himself the purchaser of a pump organ.

Birdwell arrives home a few days ahead of the organ, thinking he might gradually acclimate his minister wife to the idea of the instrument. It doesn't go well. He begins pontificating about how the birds sing and the angels play harps to the glory of God, and his wife astutely replies: “Thee's neither bird nor angel, Jess Birdwell, and had the lord wanted thee, either singing or plucking a harp, thee would be feathered now, one way or another.”

The organ arrives. There is a husband and wife row over its arrival, and when the dust settles, the organ stays, but relegated to the attic.

It would seem that this would be well enough, except that, as it always will, rumor works its way round, and soon enough, the ministry and oversight board has come a-calling.

They know their task – and it is not a pleasant one. They come in their Sunday best to the house prepared to confront their minister with her tolerant ways. And though Jess has been careful of when he has played, his young daughter, who is learning music has gone up to the attic and husband and wife alike hear the telltale sound of the bellows filling as she pumps the organ and know that what will come will tell the tale. And in that moment, Jess knows that he has sold his inheritance for a mess of potage, like Esau of the Bible, only worse: Esau only sold his birthright, Birdwell has sold both his and his wife's

for the sake of an organ. As Birdwell and his wife sit in their parlor with the ministry and oversight board, Jess feels the weight of what is to happen. And West writes: before his lips moved his heart began to pray, “lord, deliver thy servant from the snare of his own iniquity.

As the music begins, Jess is on his feet saying, “Friends let us lift our hearts in prayer.” And he prays in a voice that shook the studding of his home. “he went through the Bible, book by book and sinner by sinner. He prayed in the name of Adam, who had sinned and fallen short of grace, of Moses, who had lost the promised land; of David, who had looked with desire on another man’s wife. He prayed in the name of Solomon and his follies, of Abraham and his jealousies, and of Jephthah, who kept his word in cruelty; he made music of his own out of his contrition...He left the old testament and prayed for them all, sinners alike in the name of Paul, who what he would not, he did; and of Peter, who said he knew the man not, and of Thomas, who doubted and Judas who betrayed and of that Mary who repented.”

His voice rises and falls with the music. It swells with the crescendos and diminishes on the decrescendos. And he does not finish until the last Chords of the organ have been played. And then he sits.

Soon the chair of the ministry and oversight committee stands. “Friend, thee’s been an instrument of the Lord this night,” he said. “Thee’s risen to the throne of grace and carried us all upwards on thy pinions. Thy prayer carried us so near to heaven’s gates that now and again I thought I could hear angels’ voices choiring and the sound of heavenly harps.”

And then the ministry and oversight board left with amens whispering and lingering on their tongues.

“We, in every act of life, and through our singing, as long as we are here, are messengers sent for each other: to heal each other, ourselves, and to light the way - to light the way, through our song – to light the way for everyone.”

One last thing about Mrs. Leete: about thirty years later I was in the Presbyterian Hospital in Charlotte visiting members of my congregation, when the chaplain, a mutual friend, said to me, “You should stop by the Emergency Room, Baron. They’ve brought in Ralph Leete, and it doesn’t look good. Frances is down there with him.” So I went down there, and Mrs. Leete looked up at me and said, “Do you remember that time you sang *All Creatures of Our God and King* for me?”

It was, and remains for me, an experience of the Kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed – the smallest of all, and yet it grows into a mighty tree and the birds of the air take their rest in it.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.