

It will never happen again because the rules have all been changed. But in 1980, there was still an idealistic dream that the modern day Olympics would re-create the ancient Greek vision. So the Olympic regulations stated that all competing athletes were supposed to be amateurs. It was a nice idea in theory, but in practice it was a much different matter. It was the Cold War era and the Olympics had become the place for Eastern block countries to display their power and control. Countries behind the iron curtain began training their most promising athletes not to be soldiers, but to be Olympians. They were paid by the government to practice their athletic skill every day, training like a soldier in boot camp. What this effectively created were Olympic teams from Communist countries that were in all ways except name, professional athletes. Meanwhile in the capitalistic United States, if you were really good at a particular sport, you turned pro, meaning that you were ineligible for the Olympics. So in the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, N.Y., everyone knew that the professional Russian team could not possibly lose to anyone. Not only had they won the last four Olympic gold medals, but they had not even lost a single Olympic game since 1968. That is why when that rag-tag collection of American college kids and guys not good enough to play in the lowest hockey minor leagues beat the Russians, the game is still referred to today as the miracle on ice, and is regarded by many as the greatest upset in the history of sports.

I believe that event touched Americans so deeply because, we are, at our

historical core, underdogs. This country was founded, for the most part, by Europeans who failed miserably in their homeland. They were so desperate that they were willing to leave everything behind and get on a ship to travel across an ocean where there was a better than even chance they would die before they arrived. The other founders of this new nation were not sent here of their own free will, but were prisoners in European jails. The final piece of the American quilt is our Native population already here, who were promptly kicked, abused and rejected by all the losers that came here. America was formed from the bottom of the bucket. The miracle on ice of 1980 was a modern day sporting reminder of the greatest military upset of all time, the American Revolution.

As Americans therefore, we have no trouble relating to the story in today's reading from First Samuel. Samuel is no dummy. He knows a mismatch when he sees one. Figuring out who God is going to choose as the next king of Israel is no more difficult than choosing who would win the American Revolution. Let's see, should we go with the formally trained and polished British soldiers or a bunch of hillbilly rejects who couldn't even make a living in England? Should we choose the Russian athletes who have honed their skills and trained for this moment their entire lives or a bunch of kids who today would not be old enough to legally drink?

Samuel knows that God will choose Jesse's son, Eliab to be the new king of Israel. When Yahweh does not, he is sure it is going to be Abinadab, then he is sure it will be Shammah. What he is absolutely positive is not a possibility is that Yahweh will choose the kid, the rookie, the youngest son. He is so sure of this that he doesn't even

call David in from the fields, where he is participating in the most degrading and lowliest of activities, watching the stupid sheep. So of course, who does God choose? Exactly.

I like to tell myself that I have chosen my religious path for very heady, theological reasons. I've told you all before that for me, religion cannot just be an experience of the heart, but must also be an activity of the mind, studied and reasoned from every direction. But today's readings make me wonder. Could it be that I am just fooling myself and that I am really attracted to the Judeo/Christian tradition because these stories touch me in some primal place? Could it be that my deep American roots draw me to a God who over and over again chooses the underdog? Because not only does Yahweh choose the lowliest of the low, David today, but God consistently makes this choice throughout the Hebrew text. And of course when we get to the Christian testament, Jesus sides with every loser throughout the Gospels. I believe the story of the miracle on ice touches me so deeply, not only because I am American but also because I am a Christian. The story of the underdog is not just emotionally compelling story but it is also spiritually uplifting.

This is also why in my family there has never been a clear distinction between religion and baseball. Watching my blue collar, small market home team attempt to compete with the big boys teaches me the same lessons that I learn when reflecting on our sacred text. There is an honor in being the underdog and our God finds dignity in this role. There is something theologically and emotionally powerful in the realization that our God is all about cultivating tiny, unimportant seeds into healthy and vital plants

that will quietly change the entire face of the world from the ground.

This past week, the clergy of our Diocese gathered at the ECCU to discuss who we are and what kind of leader we think would be most helpful for this Diocese in this time and place. We were encouraged to do this in a right brained kind of way and my group decided that we would write an episcopal.harmony.com ad for our next Bishop. It said that we were seeking an individual who was willing to listen to and be with an eclectic and often odd body of laity and clergy. A person who was willing to scatter seeds everywhere to grow a crop of organic Christians, and a person who was willing to live in a hierarchical, patriarchal dominated culture, while preaching something quite different.

What we did was acknowledge the fact that, especially here, we are all underdogs and perhaps a little weird too. The amazing thing about our tradition though, is that this is a good thing. When we are the underdog, our Biblical stories suggest to us that we are following God's call to us. These stories also suggest that when we are the underdog, we have the world right where we want it. We are in a position to change the world as Jesus did, from the bottom up.

That is why I love today's Gospel. These two parables of what the kingdom of God is like are full of underdog metaphors. The first speaks of the amazing and mysterious way that insignificant seeds grow into plants. This is how the kingdom of God operates, underdogs hidden under the surface, that will grow into something life changing. Similarly, the mustard seed metaphor suggests how insignificant seeds or people can win, even when it appears impossible from the world's standards. But for

me, there is more to the mustard seed parable than an affirmation about the positives of being the underdog. I think what Jesus is doing is also giving us a lesson on how to be an underdog, on how we are to win the miracle on ice even when everyone says we have no chance.

To get that message though, the first thing we need to do is think about Jesus's choice of plants. The mustard seed parable is in Luke and Matthew, as well as Mark. In Luke and Matthew, they refer to the end product of the mustard seed being a tree. But those of you who have seen mustard growing know that Mark has it right in today's text. Even in its most prolific form, mustard is no more than a bush. The idea that Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God is a giant tree growing from a tiny seed misses the point. The kingdom of God, Jesus says is not a Cedar of Lebanon but a shrub. Say what?

But it is even worse than that. For a farmer in the Middle East, mustard is not your friend. It is something that grows in the middle of your crops, strangling them. Hit mustard plant on Google and you will come up with hundreds of sites suggesting how you might eradicate mustard from your cultivated fields. Mustard beloved, is a WEED! Instead of comparing the kingdom of God to a Redwood, Jesus is comparing it to a tumbleweed, to a tamarisk, to kudzu, for those of you from the south.

The kingdom of God is like a weed? How can that be? I think that is the point. God's kingdom is so different from what we imagine or expect. It is also so different than the model of a kingdom on earth. Earthly kingdoms could be imaged by a redwood tree that grows from a tiny seed. But the kingdom of God is small in

comparison, just a nuisance from the vantage point of those in secular power. This suggests to me that the kingdom of God must always be in natural conflict with the kingdoms of the world. That means if we find ourselves always on the side of the reigning world power, perhaps we better rethink our position. Herein lies our example of how we are to live in a world that continues to oppress and alienate us and others. We are not to try to overwhelm them with power, but instead we are to be a fly in their ointment, a nuisance, a weed in their garden. We are to be an uncontrollable and disorderly force in the world to bring about the change that creates God's kingdom. We are to be pesky intruders, introducing the seed of the Word of God into the ordered gardens of society. That is, Jesus tells us, how the underdog with no power can win.

It is exactly that strategy that worked for the patriots of the American Revolution and for the college kids of the 1980 US Olympic Hockey team, and for scores of other underdogs throughout the world. It is our model as individuals, as sports teams, as a country, and as a church. Don't try to overpower the power brokers. But instead, work from the bottom up, under ground, as a gadfly, standing up against all attempts to dishonor any individual or any part of creation.

In recent years, I have noticed a tendency across society to move away from this Gospel message. For example, as a church we have attempted to bully people into seeing something from our point of view. Most recently, I think of the battle in the Anglican communion. Telling Africans that we have all the answers and that they need to listen to us is just more colonialism. It is the opposite of what Jesus teaches us in the mustard parable.

As the church, we have also been guilty of becoming part of the power structure rather than standing up against it. Whenever we as the church start acting as part and parcel of the government, then we have missed our calling to be the nuisance mustard plant.

In recent years, America has also moved from being an underdog to flexing its muscles and wielding its power in an attempt to cause other countries, groups and individuals to conform. Such behavior is unbecoming of us and flies in the face of today's Gospel. From a biblical perspective, we need to return our country to a position of leading as if we were still underdogs.

Even in the playful arena of the sporting world, I have detected a similar movement. Have you noticed lately the preponderance of Yankee and Red Sox hats being worn? I bet I have seen more of those two hats than all other baseball caps combined in recent years. This is also a sign of our movement as a culture from underdogs to people who love to back a winner.

All of that makes sense. Who wants to always be last? Who wants to never have any power to control a situation? But today, Jesus teaches us that leading from the back of the pack also has its advantages. We plant the seed, but God does all the rest. We are not responsible for the germination process that allows the kingdom to in-break on someone or some group. All we do is spread the word, and trust in God's power to produce fruit. That is how we sleep tonight in an anxiety ridden world. We know that through our seed tossing, God spreads the kingdom faster than tamarisk has taken over the banks of the Colorado. Faith in the future frees us from anxiety now.

This morning then, I urge all of us to return to our roots. Let us embrace the Yahweh of the Hebrew Bible who chooses one underdog after another. Let us steep ourselves in the Jesus tradition, remembering that we are called to back the last place horse, to care for the person who never has a chance to win anything. Let us live into the parable of the mustard weed, not wielding power over others, but changing minds and hearts by continuing to grow in an uncontrollable and disorderly fashion all over the place, becoming so prolific that we cannot be pulled up. Let us return to embracing our roots as Americans and start to believe again in miracles, on ice and everywhere else. So let's lose the Yankee and Red Sox persona, and return our allegiances to our home teams, even if they always stink. And if you don't have a home team, consider backing the mustard weed of baseball, the Chicago Cubs, who have now been waiting 101 years to win the World series. Let us embrace our underdog roots, not because we are masochists, but because we know that in being underdogs we are living into our Biblical tradition and creating the kingdom of God as Jesus taught us. Amen.