

**ENDLESS FORMS; MARK 4:26-34; JUNE 14, 2009;
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Lots going on today: celebrating high school graduates; thanking Sunday School teachers; holding our annual meeting in a few minutes. Much to be thankful for!

A colleague made an interesting observation the other day. He said that all the attention surrounding Susan Boyle – the improbable middle-aged woman from a Scottish village with the voice of an angel who competed in the British version of American idol with a song from *Les Mis* – this colleague said that our fascination with Ms. Boyle is precisely because her story is a story of redemption.

What he meant is that Ms. Boyle who lives with her cat; leads, she says, a socially deprived life; and who is an otherwise nameless face in the crowd – managed, in the space of seconds after opening her mouth to sing, to turn the hall upside down with adoring, awe-struck admirers.

Because her gift for singing is disguised by her ordinary, even homely appearance and life she shocked the cynical judges and audience into confessions and apologies ending in the highest praise. If you saw the YouTube video – her charming honesty and candor; her sparkling, spunky personality heaped coals on the heads of the all-powerful judges.

But this colleague also added that we are fascinated with Ms Boyle because her story of redemption is *our story* of redemption. We too are nameless members of the crowd, gifted and improbable. The message of Susan Boyle is the message to each of us that redemption, new life comes to the flawed, the broken, the ordinary.

So in the shouts and cheers and tears of the audience we witnessed the ultimate justice of this unknown underdog being greeted with the highest admiration and respect essentially for being herself.

At one level this is the story of the race horse Seabiscuit; or Satchel Paige and other forgotten Negro League ball players who were inducted into the Hall of Fame; or the 1980 US Olympic hockey team winning the gold medal defeating the feared Russians.

But at a deeper, spiritual level this is the story of our faith. A poor itinerant rabbi travels the hill country of Galilee telling stories of hope and healing, taking on the military-religious-industrial complex of the time. Thwarting their last best chance to silence him and his message of hope.

They failed to silence him because at the core of his life and death and resurrection is God's promised redemption: that courage and valor and honesty and kindness trump the shadows and darkness of life and finally death itself. And those who live into that promise are transformed.

When that message exploded on Easter Sunday and again on Pentecost suddenly the authorities had an exponentially multiplying number of Susan Boyles to contend with.

More and more people living with abandon, singing their hearts out so to speak because they no longer lived in the shadows of fear but in the light of God's love.

And what the authorities had to deal with was the passion of people willing to risk life itself to share with others this life-changing, redeeming love that rescued them and they knew could rescue the most hopelessness.

Why am I talking about Susan Boyle and redemption today? Because these are hard times. These are times more and more people are asking themselves if they can go on; if they can manage to make their lives, their families, their careers work in the midst of a recession that has pushed some holding on by their fingernails over the edge, and others who were just struggling by to the very brink itself.

I would offer today that there is no story as powerful as the story of redemption in a human life – Susan Boyle’s life; the lives of that small band of Jesus’ followers; the lives of wave after wave in every generation since; in your life and my life.

No story as relevant to the human experience. No story better able to transform individuals from lackluster existence into lives of purpose and meaning; no story more aimed to transform communities of people from tired honoring of tradition to risk-taking behavior aimed at nothing less than the redemption of the entire human family.

What I am talking about really is the power of the seed Jesus discusses today in his parable – that the Reign of God in a human life or a community of people is like a mustard seed, tiny in the beginning but then it germinates, sprouts, takes root and grows into a tree that shelters birds and animals.

What I am talking about is the mysterious fecundity of the Gospel described in Jesus’ other parable today when he says all we need to do is scatter the seed, the Good News, the story of redemption – and let God do the rest.

Sun and rain come, the seeds of Good News bear not just fruit but acres and acres of rich harvest. That’s how the stories of our redemption and the church’s redemption take hold, grow and spread.

It would be easy to say since there’s a global fiscal crisis we’d better pull back; since the church in a city like Buffalo struggles, it would be easy to conclude that nothing much will grow in this patch of God’s creation.

But if we conclude that then we have neither heard nor understand Jesus today.

Rather, what he tells us and what Susan Boyle reminds us is that we are uniquely equipped to sing the song of God’s promised redemption for all people. That is, scatter the seeds of Good News, then trust the power of the seed and the mysterious fecundity, the unstoppable growth of God’s spirit invading, transforming human lives, ushering in the Reign of God in relationships and families and congregations.

Whether illness or economic woe or broken dreams what Jesus is saying today is trust the song of redemption to unleash the growing power of your soul. Where we had fallen silent or dormant or prepared ourselves to eke out our days we are now, in the Risen Christ, called to live, to give ourselves into the care of God’s amazing, inexplicable power.

When you look around the room what you see are stories of redemption waiting to happen; when you look at our community what you see is a city longing to witness and learn from real lives that have been transformed.

God meets us where we are and remakes us into who we were created and blessed in our baptisms to be. There is nothing to earn or do. No test or template. Just acceptance and trust.

Last Thursday John Perry and I drove around the West Side. Talk about Susan Boyles!

Micro businesses planted by the Westminster Economic Development Initiative popping up like spring crocuses along the pot-holed streets and graffitied neighborhoods.

If we have eyes to see it and ears to hear it there are stories of redemption in every new Habitat for Humanity home on Ferguson Ave.; in every child who came from that neighborhood to our ENERGY after school tutoring program.

Stories of redemption our Sunday School teachers could tell you about their own experience teaching; stories of redemption our teenagers who park cars this weekend to earn money to take their work project to Maine will see in the power of the Gospel touching lives of the rural poor.

In a minute, we'll be talking, as we need to talk, about budget and finance and stewardship and buildings and grounds. But the real story today, annual meeting Sunday, the reason we have a budget and these buildings at all, is because someone else's story of redemption became our story of redemption. The seeds are already there upon our hearts.

That's what Jesus says today we're to be about: letting the story of God's new life take hold, germinate and grow in our hearts.

That's what our city and nation and world need us to be about. That's what gives us hope and the will to stand up and sing our song like Susan Boyle to a jaded and broken world. Amen.