

Cuba: Three Stories and an Invite

written by Christopher Levan

June 16, 2024

Scripture Mark 4: 30-32 Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. ³² Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”

All Saints Anglican Church, Salt Spring Island

Preface:

It is an honour to speak with you this morning. Ellen and I have found a spiritual home here at All Saints and while we are not Anglicans, by heritage, we are becoming part of this sustaining circle and we are so grateful for your grace and hospitality. Ellen is away in California at a Norwegian Dance camp and so while she is not here in person, she sends her best wishes.

Paul has invited me to take this sermon time to speak of my work in Cuba. It has been a life-long journey and it is a pleasure to share my hopes and dreams with you. Having travelled to Cuba for close to 40 years, it is like my second home. I’ve taught at a local seminary and preached at several churches, pastoring for an extended time in a Presbyterian congregation in a poor neighbourhood of Havana. My son married a Cuban and so I have family there and given that I travelled about as a United Church minister and professor for my professional—making and then losing friendships, many of my closest and constant friends actually live in Cuba.

I'll explain my past and current passion for Cuba by telling you three stories and I'll end with an invitation for you to join me in a specific project that is just now taking place. The stories are captured in two word phrases: "Train Ride," "Band Leader," and "White Flour."

But before we get to the stories, let's begin this morning with a brief look at the passage from Mark's gospel that was just read.

Mark 4: 30-32 Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. ³² Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade."

Two quick notes: First, Jesus is speaking in parables here and a parable is not an endless allegory. I know it is common for preachers to examine every detail of the tale Jesus tells, equating each aspect with an historical event or person and making comparisons to our current life. So for instance, in this passage from Mark, you might think of the mustard seed as a fledging little Christian community or their faithfulness, the branches of the mustard plant could be the growth of evangelism and the birds who nest in the mighty mustard plant with potential converts or a Roman authority figure...Indeed, it seems that Matthew and Luke did just that, taking this story from Mark and using it to equate the mustard seed with faith, Faith like a mustard seed, small though it is, can move mountains. But ... but a parable is not designed for that purpose. They are not extended allegories. Think of them as a one-line joke. They're meant to deliver a zinger of a message, simple and direct. What you see first is probably what you're supposed to get. In the case of Mark chapter 4, both the parable of the sowing of seeds at night and the parable of the mustard seed have a clear message: something small, seemingly insignificant, can

get really big. That's it. The little things gets big—and in a secondary sense...this transformation for small to big happens without our intervention.

A second point. In Mark, Jesus is using these parables to talk about the Kingdom of God. "Kingdom of God" is a key phrase for Jesus—it is a here and now moment when God rules, not Caesar, when the peace and justice spoken about in scripture and embodied in the Sabbath principles of rest and restoration become concrete and real. The Kingdom of God is not above and beyond human history. For Jesus, it is when distributive justice and restorative peace break out among us.

Because of Matthew's and Luke's use of the mustard seed comparison, we often think Jesus is referring to mustard seeds as a way to explain how faith grows. But in Mark, the little thing that becomes big is actually God's reign. Small gestures, seemingly insignificant moments of grace, grow into big things that embody God's rule of love and justice.

And with that as background, let' settle our hearts in prayer. "God help me never to use my reason against the truth."

Introduction:

For 15 years now I have been part of the group CUBAbility and we have undertaken projects as diverse as buying pumps for fresh water distribution to supporting community development training programs for seminarians. It is from the richness of these activities that my three stories arise.

A year ago, I would have introduced any conversation about Cuba with a simple fact. Whatever we might think of the legacy of Fidel Castro or the evils of a controlled economy or state communism, Cuba was the only country in the world that guaranteed every citizen a loaf of bread daily. No exceptions.

You live in Cuba, you have bread. The point is: not only is education and health care free for everyone, no one goes hungry. Jose Carneado, a great revolutionary, the man who Fidel chose to be responsible for religious affairs in Cuba opened my eyes to a simple fact. "Poverty," he said, "Is a political choice, not an economic necessity." The state's commitment to supplying basic food stuffs at affordable prices was evidence that Cuba chose not to have poverty. It was one of the mainstays of the revolution. A first world choice, made by a third world country---one of the remarkable aspects of this island culture.

But within the space of the last six months all that has changed and it's to address this change that I will orient my three stories of a "train ride," a band leader" and "white flour."

CUBA: THREE STORIES AND AN INVITE

The train Ride:

I want you to picture a young man, a sixteen year old, huddled on the train steaming out of Schreiber in Northern Ontario heading for what was then called "Port Arthur." It's 1932, the day after school let out in June. The boy is both excited and scared. Leaving his parent's hometown, he's taking his future into his own hands. Let's call him Alex, because that is his real name. Look in his eyes and you'll see both determination and a sense of humour. On his lap is a violin case, a gift from an uncle who brought the instrument for the old country. Alex was headed to the big city to live out his dream. He would become a concert violinist ... that or an airplane pilot. With the naivete that only youth can muster, he knew in his heart that with some effort and patience, he would achieve his lofty goals, even though he had just begun to play the violin and had never even seen a real plane.

As life would have it, Alex did neither of those two things with his life. He became a consummate teacher and great soul. But he only flew as a passenger on airplanes and the violin was kept in one attic store room after another, never really played, but always well-tuned and repaired. At the end of his life when Alex was suffering from COPD and struggling to get every breath, he told me of his train ride and the violin. When he was done, he gave it to me. It was to be sent to Cuba along with many others, to be given to a promising Cuban. “Perhaps, it can be the instrument for someone who has a similar dream,” Alex said.

As it happened, it was Yivi who received Alex’s violin. At the time, 10 years ago, Yivi was in the closet. A very spiritual person, she’d taken a degree in theology and worked in a church related social centre. She played Alex’s violin on stage with her band “Living Waters.” But she couldn’t be out and religious at the same time. In a very macho culture, being lesbian meant that her dreams of being a minister were unrealizable and even dangerous. But through her dedication and, of all things, the work of the daughter of Raul Castro, things began to change. Slowly at first. Then 8 years ago, along with another friend, Elaine, Yivi founded a church that welcomed everyone no matter their sexual orientation. They met first in her bedroom—biggest room in her small house. The violin was their only music.. Their church became the spiritual home for the rejected and lost, the ones who had no place to be safe and faithful at the same time. When they became too big a crowd for the house, they moved up to the roof top and for years I watched as Yivi played out her deep faith and compassion. Not only had she inherited Alex’s violin, she also grew into his sense of justice and good grace---along with his touch of humour. Eventually, Yivi’s church found a building and they meet on Friday night’s at 7:00 pm if you are ever in Matanzas. Last March, Yivi was married

to her lover. Her life—a testimony to how much Cuba has changed. It's still Larin and still macho, but Cuba has made room for the LGPTQ community and even celebrates it with an annual, nation-wide festival. Yivi will never be a concert violinist as Alex dreamed. But using his violin to bring peace and protection to others in the storms of life, is a worthy conclusion to Alex's journey on that train so long ago. A little thing has become something quite big and beautiful

The Band Leader

Alex's violin got to Cuba through the efforts of the group I mentioned: CUBAbility. We are a family of friends across the country—Sally has been part of that circle, whose purpose is to offer solidarity to Cuban brothers and sisters. As I said, over the years we have funded clean water projects, new pastoral assistants, social justice training, electric bikes and house renovations. We even bought a bake oven for a local pie maker. Over the past 9 years, we have been sending musical instruments to Cuba to be given away to local students and professors.

Music has been a central aspect of Cuban culture ... as I am sure you are aware. One of the greatest Cuban export items, right after rum and cigars is their music. But for many regular citizens owning a musical instrument is like buying a house ... beyond most people. So along with an organization called Kairos, we have shipped three containers of pianos, violins, trumpets, drums, accordions...you name it. These instruments were given away with three conditions: that the recipient promise to practice, that they promise to return their gift if they ever stop playing and they'll trade in any instrument they might have been using so it can be given to someone else. At last count we've sent down 43 pianos. We supplied an English horn for the national orchestra, a

tuba for a well-known brass quintette and a violin for a woman who is this year touring Europe with a Baroque ensemble. And the story of the band leader is one example of something small turning into something quite big.

Barry was a band leader in Toronto, spent his whole teaching career conducting one band after another. But things being what they are in the public system, there was never a budget for repairing instruments, so Barry taught himself how to tune pianos, and fix broken violins and trumpets. His dream was that in retirement he would take his skills and his considerable collection of tools down to Cuba and carry on with his vocation of helping others make music.

Alas, Barry died a month after he retired and his dream looked like it died with him. But his wife, hearing about our project to send down musical instruments, asked if we could take Barry's collection of tools. "Maybe someone might find a use for them."

And so CUBAbility arranged for the tools to be stored in a local church and be made available like a library ... so that people could borrow them when needed. But there was not a lot of local knowledge. So we put out the word for a piano tuner ... Would anyone like to go to Cuba and train people how to tune their own pianos. That's when Ralph Corlis volunteered, a retired engineer and piano tuner. Ralph's son, Timothy, you may know as a composer living on Galiano. Ralph went down a couple of times, made good contacts and even better friends in his time tuning pianos—lots of stories there.

At about the same time, the director of the local theatre approached me and asked if we could find a concert grand piano for the newly renovated concert hall in Matanzas. It's called "Teatro Sauto," and it's one of two famous musical venues in Cuba ... 160 year-old...Sauto is a grand hall that has the distinction of having a mechanical floor that be raised and lowered to suit

dancing or concerts. It had taken 10 years to renovate it, but there was no budget for a good piano worthy of the newly renovated main stage.

I went home to Canada thinking that maybe if there was a church that was closing it might have a decent piano to give or perhaps a high school with a new budget might like donate their old piano. But a concert grand. Hopeless. Nevertheless, I announced the need at a CUBAbility fund raising event and a week later Ralph, bless his heart, came to me and said he had a brand new, concert grand piano. Never been played! It was worth \$135,000 and he would give it to Cuba.

That piano went down in our third container, was put in the concert hall with great care and appreciation. It's still there and last December it was featured in a nation-wide broadcast on Christmas day. Barry's dream came true. His dedication and passion for music blossomed into a grand reality: from small seeds of hope grows some very impressive fruit.

White Flour

One last story. Fifteen years ago I took a group of 29 university students to Cuba. And as was my custom at that time, I had a few students pack a bag of flour into their luggage so I could make pizza when we were there. Pizza is a central part of the Cuban street diet ... but that's another story. Here we are at the airport...all excited and I needed to find two volunteers to help me with some last minute donations. I'd received a clear plastic bag of white flour from a neighbour, Could it go down? And a Cuban friend, Ary, a doctoral student at the time, asked if I would get a box of his New Testament books back to his home in Havana. I gave the flour to Cameron, a hippy type guitar playing religious studies major. The theological books were taken by Christy, a very conscientious hard working, good-natured sophomore.

At the airport I was sure Cameron would be stopped and searched. Non-descript bag of white powder brought by a bearded folk singer—a no brainier. But it was actually Christy that was stopped. We spent an hour going through that box of books, explaining to the customs officials what each volume meant. I never thought I would have a theological debate in an airport customs hall. Those books eventually made it to Ary's home. Just this past Wednesday Ary was installed as the new rector of the Ecumenical Seminary in Matanzas—so the books were put to good use. And the flour ... it became the first in a long line of flour bags that have gone to Cuba and what began as a small gesture of hospitality has grown into a mission to feed the hungry. That's where my invitation begins.

The Invite

As I said, Cuba rations it's food supply. Not to restrict consumption but to insure there is an adequate supply for all citizens. From the beginning of the revolution the government made a pledge that basic food staples would be available to all—no exceptions. A symbol of that commitment was the assurance that milk would be free for all children up to the age of 7 and bread would be baked for every citizen every day. Six months ago, given the economic crisis in Cuba, the American blockade and a world shortage of grain, the government announced that bread would only be guaranteed every other day.

That's a crisis. For sixty years a small bun or slice of bread was breakfast for Cubans. They don't eat eggs and can't afford prepared cereals. Bacon is non-existent and pancakes are a rare. So your morning coffee was accompanied always with bread. But when bread was not available or only to be found at exorbitant prices in private stores, what do you do. People need bread.

Over the years I had been talking about building a bakery as a tool for training and teaching and had even taught a couple of university courses using bread as a vehicle for biblical studies. A bakery was a clever idea, my Cuban friends admitted, but not necessary given government supplies of bread.

But now people see a bakery as an essential means of survival.

This past March, along with Wanda a local pastor and social worker, we found a room to turn into a bakery. It's not what you might think ... it's on the ground floor of a half-ruined building, but it has water and light and stays dry. We moved in a propane make-shift oven and a bake table. It needs paint and plaster, a bit of electrical upgrading and it's ready to go. I've taught some bread making classes there already, but a baker needs to be hired and trained, a supply line for flour has to be established and the basic baking supplies need to be found.

Our idea is to have a bakery that supplies food to the marginalized first--seniors and those with few family supports—at the same low rates as government bakeries. Once these folk are supported, this bakery will sell bread to others, but it will also be the center for training individuals on how to make their own bread at home and a teaching space to bring believers from around the country together to learn how bread was featured in the ministry and mission of Jesus of Nazareth.

And that's my invitation to you. Can you help me build this bakery. It's still a small thing ... a mustard seed, if you will. But with your help, it will grow ...I can see it. We need two things: people who are willing to accompany me on a trip down to Cuba this coming October—bringing baking supplies from Canada in their luggage and good will in their hearts. As a group we'll help Cubans fix up the bakery and build bridges of trust and friendship at the same time. The second thing we need is money. With \$8,000 we can run the

bakery for two years, pay salaries and buy flour ... long enough for it to become established, to consolidate its training and teaching functions.

Paul suggested that All Saints might consider taking on a mission project like this...I will leave that in your hands...not knowing how such things get decided in this denomination. I would be pleased to be a resource if this community of faith wanted to build bridges of friendship and faith with a church community in Cuba.

But with respect to the bakery project, here's what I suggest. My invitation is to come to my house (740 Walker's Hook Rd.,) next Thursday...7:00 pm (that's June 20th) for coffee and dessert. I know a good baker who can do us up some treats—and I will answer questions and explain in more detail what is involved in either coming with me to Cuba or making a donation to this project.

Thank you for your gracious attention. I believe I am not alone...you too have been part of the miracle...how small gestures of grace and generosity blossom into great movements of love and justice.

Peace

Footnote:

My most recent tour to Cuba included a good friend and photographer, Andrew McRae who has just recently published his photos on line. [See them here.](#)