

Psalm 105:1-11, 45b
Matthew 13:31-33

Eighth Sunday After Pentecost, Year A
Midway Presbyterian Church
July 23, 2023

Big Things Come in Small Packages

Introduction to the Psalm

Our Psalm today celebrates God's faithfulness to the covenant made with Israel. And the psalmist implores the people to remember God's wondrous works, not for sentimental reasons, but as a way of defining the present, and inviting them to a future given by this remembered God. Listen to these words from Psalm 105:1-11 and 45b . . .

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

In our Gospel reading from the so-called "parable chapter" of Matthew's gospel, Jesus speaks to disciples who may be discouraged about their investment in the Christian mission. Through parables, matters of everyday peasant life illustrate the nature of the kingdom of heaven. Our focus today is on the Parable of the Mustard Seed. Listen to these words from Matthew 13:31-33 and 44-52 . . .

Sermon

There is a small village in the rolling hills of Bavaria, Germany, which never ceases to amaze all who learn of its history. In the mid-1800's, a young parish pastor came to this simple farming village called Neuendettelsau, located 20 miles southwest of Nuremberg. Wilhelm Loehe is now known around the world for the work he was able to begin in what he called a "silent wilderness." Loehe was considered by some to be one of the finest preachers of the nineteenth century. He understood the possibilities of beginning small and planting seeds of the kingdom in his little village. Whole families relocated from across Germany to be in his church and to hear his kingdom-centered preaching.

Over one thousand missionaries have gone out from that little town to distant countries of the world. A deaconess movement began that produced thousands of white capped angels of mercy. Homes were built in the little village for orphans, the sick, the emotionally disturbed, the physically handicapped, and the elderly. A Lutheran seminary was established. And although he never visited here in the United States, Loehe and his disciples were the founders of the Missouri Synod. They started seminaries in Fort Wayne, Indiana; Dubuque, Iowa; and Columbus, Ohio. Missions to Native Americans were begun in Michigan. All this began in a very small way in a tiny village by a Lutheran pastor.

William Barclay says that in Palestine the mustard seed was proverbial for its smallness. The Rabbis spoke of “a spot or blemish as small as a mustard seed.” In Matthew 17:20 Jesus said that with faith only the size of a mustard seed, we can move mountains.

Some of us have planted mustard greens in our gardens in the early spring or fall. Cooked with turnip greens and their roots, and served with a sweet potato, cornbread, and buttermilk, they make a tasty, nutritious meal. For me, it’s a delight just to walk in and smell them cooking. It reminds me of the story in Genesis 25 of Esau being willing to sell his birthright when he came in from the field famished and got a scent of the lentil stew that Jacob was cooking.

But in Palestine mustard was not a garden plant but a plant of the field because it commonly grew to a height of seven, eight, even ten feet, with branches that looked like the branches of a tree. And so we read, “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that a man took and planted in his field.” At maturity it could be used for oil, as a condiment, or as an herb. And the birds of the heavens would come and dwell in its branches. Its large leaves would provide shade; the branches a place to nest, and the seeds a source of food.

Likewise, the kingdom of Christ that started with a baby in a manger, in the little town of Bethlehem, extends to the ends of the earth and incorporates people of every race. No, our parable does not guarantee the growth of the church at any particular time or place. But it does promise great things will come from small seeds planted in the Kingdom of God.

It would be understandable that the disciples who heard Jesus speak this parable had become bewildered and discouraged. They had such great hopes in the Messiah, but they could see growing waves of hostility. Would the mission of Jesus which started with such promise, would it end in failure and defeat? Thus, the little parable of the little mustard seed.

Yes, in the story before us this morning, there is optimism, but it doesn't have to do with the immediate success of the church, its membership or budgets, nor does it have to do with the prosperity of individual believers. It does have to do with the ultimate triumph of the Kingdom of God, though shrouded in mystery.

In her book, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, Marva Dawn says that in our modern-day spirituality we can easily lose the notion of God's provision for us because of our advanced civilization and its disconnect from the actual process of food being grown. A major blessing of Sabbath keeping is that it reminds us to rely on God for our future. On the Sabbath we do nothing to create our own way. We abstain from our need to produce and accomplish, from all the anxieties about how we can be successful and all that we have to do to get ahead. Workday thoughts and cares are put aside. The result is that we can let God be God in our lives and in our church. And we assume our rightful place as beloved children of the Heavenly Father.

God's dominion *can* be seen in the growth and fruitfulness of the church and individuals, but it can also be found in the slums of Calcutta where Mother Teresa cared for the sick, the poor, and the forgotten. It can be seen in the hospital room where God's presence and love are reflected in the faces of those who care for a sick or dying person. It can be found in the world

wherever destructive forces of evil are overcome, wherever people do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

It is easy for Christian workers to become discouraged because they cannot always or even very often see immediate results from their work. Sometimes, for example, a preacher will preach as faithfully and as passionately as possible, yet see a congregation leave, apparently unmoved. There's a story of a bishop who was the guest preacher in a church. And at the time of the children's message, the children were allowed to ask the bishop about his work. One little fellow asked, "What do you like to do best?" And the bishop answered, "I like best to mow our lawn—because I can see that I have accomplished something."

The parable of the mustard seed teaches us several things, clearly *hope* being one of them. Although nature's growth is mysterious, and seemingly insignificant at first, it nonetheless is inevitable. And a growing tree is a powerful thing. It can split concrete with the power of its roots. A weed can push its green head through an asphalt path. So it is with the Kingdom of God. In spite of discouragement, disobedience, or rebellion, God's purposes are accomplished.

This parable teaches us hope, but it also teaches us *patience*. "Rome was not built in a day." Nor does seed produce fruit in a day. Seed grows slowly to maturity. But people today don't like to wait—they want instant oatmeal; they want instant messaging and instant gratification. But the Kingdom of God does not come immediately. The seed of the Word is sown and then we must patiently wait for results. We can plant, we can fertilize, we can water, we can cultivate. But we must wait for the fruit to be born. I'm trying to be patient with the okra plants in my garden this year.

Hope, patience, what else? *Potential*. The parable of the mustard seed suggests that great potential can come in small packages. What can a tiny mustard seed do, or amount to? But in the seed is the power of life to grow to maturity and bless the birds of the air.

The story of the Kingdom of God is parallel to the story of Jesus himself: lowly beginning, magnificent results. George MacDonald expressed it well:

They all were looking for a king
to slay their foes and lift them high:
Thou cam'st a little baby thing
That made a woman cry.

Likewise, the church. It begins with a lowly crew of disciples who had no credentials or advanced degrees in theology. But by the power of the Holy Spirit, they preach and teach and heal and serve—and the majesty of God is revealed. The tiny seed begins to grow. New life begins to sprout forth.

In 1828 Thomas and Anne Goulding hosted five young ministry students in their Lexington, Georgia, manse. There around the kitchen table Thomas Goulding taught them to translate the Greek New Testament. Well, that table now stands in the seminary President's outer office as a perpetual reminder of those small beginnings from which Columbia Theological Seminary has grown to a place of leadership in theological education.

The greatest things often start from the smallest beginnings. All music comes from the octave. From these eight notes come every hymn, every anthem, every song, every concerto, every cantata, every opera, every masterpiece: Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro," Handel's "The Messiah," Strauss' "The Blue Danube." All English literature is built on just twenty-six letters of the alphabet. William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Every poem, every speech, every treatise, every written document, every library—no matter the size—is built on just twenty-six letters.

My friends, we need to remember the parable of the mustard seed, just as the Psalmist today calls us to remember the wonders God has done. And let that remembrance shape our lives today. So, don't be discouraged because of seemingly small things. Much that Jesus spoke

of during his life could be described as little or insignificant: a grain of mustard seed, a cup of cold water, one talent, a widow's mite, a lost coin. In and of themselves they were nothing, but filled with the spirit of the living God, they became vehicles for the transforming message of the gospel. Sometimes such little things as a thank-you note, some flowers, a meal, a phone call, a visit, or a hand on the shoulder, can bloom into much more than we ever imagined—by the grace and power of God.

So, as citizens of the Kingdom of God, as members of the church of Jesus Christ, let us plant the seeds of faith, hope and love—the seeds of the gospel. Then let us trust God to bring forth the harvest.

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