

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
July 17, 2018
The Rev. Jamie Samilio

Mustard Seed

The Gospel Reading for today is a little, seedy if you will. The two parables speak of “the kingdom of God,” and illuminate, as much as we can understand, about the aspects of God’s reign. In both stories, Jesus talks about seeds – think of the seed as a metaphor for formation and education, and we will need that. Because God’s new order will take root and come to fruition, whether people want it or not.

Our part in the journey, the sprouting, growth and spread of the Kingdom will determine where we stand once it is completed. Jesus’ parables have a way of reordering our conventional, earthly assumptions and values. *Parables are not moral tales or even explanations. They are intended to upend our assumptions of the “givens” and even “realities” that we accept unquestioningly, and offer us a vision of something different. Because they call into question accepted “truths,” they are almost always subversive, challenging and even goading us to consider other possibilities in light of God’s promises.* They don’t explain how we recognize the reign of God, but they make it clear that we will need to change our earthly perspective and adopt new ways of looking at our relationship to God and to each other—specifically how we are connected. Or as Paul put it in the Epistle, *“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”*

The parable of the mustard seed is found in all three synoptic gospels Matt, Mark, Luke, and in Thomas. This is a famous story— people have named bookstores after it! The mustard in the parable is not the domestic mustard we process into a spicy condiment. The mustard plant that is referenced is a shrub and not a tree, and it grows and spreads quickly. Farmers did not like it because it could take over a field and inhibit grain production. I looked at some photos online, and it is a rather large shrub that is tree like and does provide homes for God’s creatures. The seed is very small, and looks like it would work well on an everything bagel. But, as small as it is, a mustard seed is packed with potential. While we cannot bring on God’s reign of love, redemption, and grace—like the mustard shrub, we also cannot control it, moderate it, or domesticate it, and we definitely can’t stop it. God’s Reign, is like the mustard plant, an out of control weed, grows and spreads whether you want it or not.

In Luke’s version of the mustard seed, Jesus warned the disciples that there will be things on our journey that cause us to stumble—temptation is everywhere—and we should guard against us being the ones to trip others up along the way. We need to be in right relationship with each other and forgive each other, if we as a body are to help usher in the reign of God. We are in this together, and we need to remember to forgive. In Luke, The apostles said to the Lord, *“Increase our faith!”* Jesus replied, *“If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.”* I bring up Luke especially for this last line concerning faith. Hang on to faith, it will hang onto you and rescue you when you need it the most, and faith’s sister hope will do the same. Life is hard, but it is so worth the journey, so forgive people, keep moving forward and enjoy the ride. It is our faith that lets the reign of God come in and work through us.

God promises us that God is on the move, continually creating. It also means that when life is hard, when we meet resistance, or when we fail or fall far short of our hopes, that we can take refuge in the promise that God is still at work and has not given up on us, or the world. As Theologian David Lose said, *“Work like it’s all up to you, and pray like it’s all up to God.”* *Throw ourselves into the opportunities and challenges ahead of us with equal measures of delight and resolve, keep at it knowing that God is with us and for us, and give it our all, knowing that no work done in love is ever lost and that God, in time, will draw all things together for good.*

We cannot, in short, measure the strength or validity of God's promises based on our efforts, but rather allow the promises of the God who created light out of darkness and raised Jesus from the dead to give us a quiet and resilient confidence, and rejoice when we see God's reign lived out, and encouraged to keep faith when we don't.

It is the nature of God's reign to grow and to manifest itself in our hearts, in society, and the world—that is what it does. And, like a seed, God's reign must grow, even if untended, and even if its gradual expansion is nearly impossible to detect.

Here is where we come into the story— God's reign does not need to grow untended, we can tend to it. But who are we, and what can we do to tend the coming of the reign of God? I for one do not think of myself as a leading theologian or philosopher. I am not a Ruth, or a Ghandi, not a Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Julian of Norwich, Reinhold Neibuher, or Victor Frankle—I am just Jamie. Do you really believe in your heart and have faith that you can make a difference? Can you help usher in God's reign? Yes! The smallest thing, the smallest act of kindness, even as small as a smile can grow into a grand, spreading, positive movement that can change the world. Not one of us is insignificant, none of us acts without leaving an impact on the world and on others. We are not small, and what we do, matters!

Today, Samuel tells us of David—the least expected of the brothers, fallible and the very last choice, left to tend the sheep, grew to be the greatest King of Israel. David, the shepherd boy, seemed to have nothing, and David's family considered him the least. Much like failing to call someone to dinner, David's family didn't even think of him, let alone call him to the lineup to be considered for the kingship. The one that the family rejected became Israel's king. While David's family thought little of him and his time with the sheep, it seems that David's time as a shepherd was just what was needed to prepare his heart. *From first mention of David in Ruth to last mention in Zechariah David's name appears more than a thousand times in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, and in the New Testament, his name appears fifty-nine times!* David's story, reveals the blessings and difficulties, the victories and defeats, the best and worst of leadership. But David was human and these words are as true today as they were in David's time, "Absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Our humanity is the one thing we cannot escape. We too may have a sense of powerlessness, that we are not worthy—that is a lie—a lie we tell ourselves. We are part of God's creation and we are good, all of us, no exceptions. All of us have the power and potential of a mustard seed within us. What we do matters, and sometimes the smallest act of kindness we do for another can have far reaching implications, which we may never even realize we empowered. A smile can change the world.

One of the first times I remember doing a random act of kindness was my freshman year in college. We had a carnival with balloons on campus. I, being an art major was wearing painters overalls, the kind with the tool loop on the side, to which I had tied a balloon. I was walking down the street and came upon a mother and her children standing at a bus stop. There was a boy about 5 years old, clinging to her leg in silent obedience. She was holding an infant on one side and her other hand was grasping onto a screaming, 2-3 year old throwing a fit. Without thinking, I stopped, untied the balloon, made a loop, and asked the crying child, "Do you like the balloon?" The little girl stopped crying, and I slipped the loop on her arm and it bounced a bit. Her mother looked at me and said, "Thank you." The brother appeared to relax a bit and smiled. I smiled, and replied to the mom, "My pleasure," and I kept walking. To this day, I have no idea what kind of impact giving a balloon to a crying child had. I am also not sure why this memory is so clear for me from so long ago. Did the act give a few minutes of peace? Did it cause the brother or Mom to do something kind for a stranger later in life? It is not for me to know. What I do know is how it made me feel.

There is no gospel in which Jesus remains buried in the ground like a dormant seed. There is no faithful act that involves putting our light under a bushel. The reign of God does not carve out a separate sacred space for a few; it claims all aspects of human existence—no exceptions. As an individual, go into the world and do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. And *teach your children well* to do the same. AMEN.

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

Psalm 20

2 Corinthians 5:6-10, [11-13], 14-17

Mark 4:26-34

Resources

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3676

Bible NSRV

Wikipedia: Mustard seed

Google: Mustard Seed

Prayer and contemplation

Conversations with The Rev. Denise Trogdon

David Lose: <http://www.davidlose.net/2018/06/pentecost-4-b-quiet-dynamic-confidence/>

Matt Skinner, Professor of New Testament

Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn.