

Growing Hope

Sermon on Matthew 13, 31-31, 44-52

Good morning, dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, Good people of Westerly, I'm glad to be back again! I have been invited to preach at Dunn's Corner Community Church for several years in a row now. I am grateful to be invited back on this beautiful day!

1) *A Metaphor*

I am sure you have all heard the saying "*An image says more than a thousand words.*" Rather than giving us a theoretical and abstract theological treatise, Jesus gives his listeners a metaphor, an image. To be exact, several metaphors, several images: But I want to zoom in on the first one our text holds: The mustard-seed.

Biblical scholars and historians tell us that we are talking about the black mustard seed, that is the size of one millimeter diameter, like a small needle head. Tiny! These are used a lot in South-Indian cooking, so if you have been to an Indian restaurant lately, you may well have eaten some of them.

These inconspicuous little seeds grow very fast, inside of one growing season, to enormous plants of seven to 10 feet height. The seeds of these "mustard-trees" are oily, so they are very popular bird-food: especially finches enjoy the double treat: they can both sit on one of the mustard-tree branches; and have a snack in the comfort of its shade.

I am a visual person, so I googled mustard-trees and was impressed of how beautiful these plants look when they blossom and how impressively high they can grow.

2) *Why this metaphor?*

So, Jesus uses the metaphor of a mustard-seed to talk about the message he was most passionate about, the “kingdom of God.” Why?

Well, I believe one reason is a pedagogical one: When we hear about the mustard-seed, our brain immediately starts conjuring up the corresponding images, right? Did your brain create pictures of these little tiny seeds in a glass jar for spices? Or a handful in your palm? Some of you told me that earlier this morning that as children you had received necklaces with a black mustard-seed worked into a see-through pendant along with this story, to remind you of this parable! What a beautiful gift you were given!

So, Jesus wanted to include the imagination of his listeners. Speaking to a largely agricultural people, who made their living by growing wheat for bread, or grapes for wine, these people understood the growing images Jesus liked using. We put the seeds into the well-prepared earth, we hope for some rain, trust the warming sun, and our little mustard-seed will grow by itself, out of its own inherent potential, it will unfold from a tiny little seed with impressive force and speed to an enormous plant - in a single growing season, in fact it will grow into the “largest plant in the garden.”

I have not yet grown mustard seeds myself to watch this wonder unfold. But my wife Debby and I once bought a little envelope of so-called Mammoth Sunflowers. We planted a couple of them in our garden and watched them grow to plants that were six, seven feet tall, and develop enormous flowers, that attracted birds who liked to eat the seeds. I'm sure the gardeners among you have similar experiences! It's quite something to see these flowers shoot up and develop such beauty and size!

3) *The Kingdom of God*

So, back to our biblical parable: “*The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed which a man took and planted in his field.*” I wonder what you all think about when you hear the word “kingdom?” We have only a few kings left in our modern world, we have several monarchies in Europe, including the recently crowned King Charles III in the United Kingdom, some in Asia and some in the middle East. But in most modern countries we don't have kings anymore, and the monarchs we have in Europe no longer hold a lot of power. When Jesus uses the Greek term “*basilea*” he refers to *royal power, kingship, dominion, rule*. Jesus consciously ties together a political term (“ruling”) with a religious concept (“God”).

So, if God were the ruler of this earth, and the earth would follow God's will, God's realm would grow from a tiny little black seed to an enormously large plant. If we think God is the planter of the seed, what might the mustard-tree stand for? What is it that Jesus wants to see grow tall and strong?

To answer that question, I want us to turn to the ‘*Our Father*,’ that we pray in every service, the prayer that Jesus himself taught his disciples:

*“Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done
On earth as it is in heaven...”*

The kingdom of God would be a place where God's will is followed and practiced, where the humanly constructed world of unjust and violent systems is transformed. Where we love our neighbors as ourselves, where we create a better world of a peaceful life together, where we create caring and inclusive, “beloved communities,” as the great Martin Luther King called them. It would mean a world with inclusive health care systems, where our family-members who fall ill receive good treatment they can afford. The realm of God would mean inclusive educational systems so that all of our children can receive good and affordable

education, so they all have equal chances for a bright future. The New Testament scholar Marcus Borg writes:

“This kingdom was not for the afterlife, but for the earth. As a political-religious metaphor, the kingdom of God referred to what life would be like on earth if God were king” (Borg, 187). “The kingdom of God was not only for the earth, but involved a transformed world. It is a blessed state of affairs, a utopia brought about by God, God’s dream for the earth.... It means the end of injustice and violence.”

So, when Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God growing like a mustard-seed, he was referring to God’s dream for the earth, a blessed state of affairs, *the transformation of life here on earth.*”

What Jesus was saying is that similar to a farmer watching the mustard-seed grow with irresistible force, he wanted to see God’s dream of peace and justice grow on our earth, from a little black seed into a formidable plant. Jesus himself was the beginning of that dream, the impersonation and manifestation of God’s love and kindness for our world.

4) Who is the planter?

If we stay with the image of the planter and the potent mustard seed for a little bit longer, I find myself wondering about one question: If, as we have established, the mustard plant is God’s dream of a new and just, caring and supportive world, who is the planter?

If we answer that question by putting it all on God and answer: *“God, of course! God is the planter,”* then we would have to wonder why there are not more mustard-trees growing and blossoming on our earth? We would have to ask: Why is there so much violence, war, injustice, destruction and hatred in our world? In our current world we are FAR from the messianic reign of justice and peace,

fraternity and compassion, care and kindness that we have described as God's dream. So, while God is the origin of love and the flow of love itself, while we believe that God is the creator and ongoing sustainer of our broken world, God alone can't or won't create the new world by Godself.

What if, friends, WE are the ones that are supposed to plant the mustard seed? What if *we* have our part to play in the great drama of God's reign? What if it is on us to prepare the grounds of our gardens, our communities, towns and countries, so this dream of God can become true? In his book about Jesus Marcus Borg underlines that we are empowered and invited to participate in God's dream:

"Participate in God's passion, participate in God's dream. Love the world as God loves the world, and change the world." (Marcus Borg)

We are invited to co-create God's new world. And Christians have been working towards that for 2000 years, sometimes by doing wonderful work, like creating hospitals, schools, infra-structure to help underprivileged people come up and learn and have a chance to stand on their own feet. And sometimes our Christian forefathers and -mothers were terribly misguided when they tried to build the kingdom of God with arms and violence, like in the medieval crusades, or as colonizers in Africa, Asia and the Americas. In our history we Christians have often completely lost sight of God's dream, and replaced it with our own dreams, nationalistic dreams of power and influence, economic greed, and human cruelty.

But we have Jesus' parables to remind us that God's dream is still alive. We can find it spelled out in our Gospel. God's world of love and peace, of friendship, instead of enmity, of fairness and justice instead of cruel injustice, of hospitality instead of hostility, of generosity instead of greed and kindness instead of judgement is right there for us to grab and plant into our respective lives.

The same Matthew who lines up a series of metaphors about the kingdom of God in our text today, highlights the importance and priority of our active participation in God's project in Chapter 6, 33:

"Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and God's righteousness; and all these things [food, clothes] shall be added unto you."

In other words, it is our task to first and foremost reach out to God, connect with our creator, and orient ourselves by paying attention to God's love. From and within that connection we can participate in growing hope, love and kindness. One way we can apply this beautiful parable of the mustard-seeds to our lives is to plant small acts of kindness wherever we can in our lives. We can all do that; we can do that every day, in the grocery store, with our neighbors, in our families, in our work-lives. When we plant these mustard seeds of kindness, we often don't know what will grow from them.

5) A mustard-seed-conversation

I want to tell you a story from my work. As you know I work as spiritual care provider in a large Boston hospital. One day I had a conversation with a 25-y/o male patient. He was sitting in a wheel-chair due to a genetic illness he had, and told me that he felt miserable. He told me that he lived with his mother, and that his mother was taking advantage of him. She was using the money he received for his disability, not letting him do what he wanted to do. And he told me that he had this dream to take control of his life, travel to California, visit his uncle and live a more self-determined life. I listened carefully to this young man, expressed my empathy for his feeling of being "locked in," and gently asked him what he was going to do about his unsatisfying situation. It was a normal, every-day chaplain conversation. I wished him well, prayed for strength and insight to find a solution and then forgot about this young man.

Half a year later I was walking along a hospital corridor when a young man in a wheel-chair waved me over and said he wanted to talk to me. The young man had grown a full, handsome beard, and he smiled broadly at me, joy flashing out his eyes. "*I have to tell you,*" the young man said, "*our conversation changed my life!*" I was so surprised. "How so," I asked. He told me: "*After our conversation I knew what to do. I took charge of my finances, I flew out to California and visited*

my uncle and I'm living with him now. I enrolled in a college and I'm working towards a degree now. I'm so glad I ran into you so I could tell you the good news!"

I'm calling this a mustard-seed-conversation. We often don't know what long-term effect conversations we offer to each other may have. Our mustard seeds may be quietly growing without our knowing it...

6) Make me an instrument of your peace

In addition to sowing mustard seeds of hope and love in small acts of kindness, we can also become instruments of God's peace in our world that is so unpeaceful. Let me close with the prayer that is often attributed to the great Saint of simplicity and love, St. Francis of Assisi. This prayer, interestingly, also uses the garden metaphor of planting:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;
Where there is hatred
Let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy!

We need to do our part, then God will do God's part and in God's immense love transform each us to become and to be instruments of God's peace!

Amen

Blessing / Benediction

Now, go forth into the world in peace

Be of good courage

Hold fast to that which is good

Render to no one, evil for evil

Support the weak

Help the afflicted

Honor all persons

Love and serve the Lord

Rejoicing in the power of his Spirit

And may the blessings of God Almighty

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

Descend upon you

And remain within you

Both now and forevermore

Amen