

**Sermon for 6-17-18**  
**Ezekiel 17:22-24 & Mark 4:26-34**  
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Last Monday, I wrote a sermon about the parable of the mustard seed. It was a perfectly acceptable, ordinary sermon with lots of nice gardening metaphors.

I didn't think about the mustard seed much on Tuesday or Wednesday. I was busy with lots of other things, and I was also preoccupied with the news reports about the end of the "G8" summit in Ontario and our President's meeting with Kim Jong Un in Singapore. My mind was filled with questions about stability and alliances and international diplomacy, and what it all means for the future of our nation and the world. I completely forgot about the mustard seed.

I didn't think about the mustard seed on Thursday or Friday, either. It seemed that everywhere I turned there was another revelation or commentary about our country's immigration policy -- specifically, the current "zero tolerance" policy of separating children and adults who cross our southern border illegally. Much of the media coverage focused on partisan arguments, with the usual talking heads hurling accusations back and forth about who's responsible for this policy, when it started, and who's really at fault. I see politicians on both sides of the aisle trying to 'score points' through all of this, and I couldn't care less what any of them have to say.

What I do care about, and what grabs hold of my attention and my mind and my heart, is the lives of the people who are caught up in this mess, the ones who are the most vulnerable -- the children. I believe that Jesus had a special love for and dedication to children, and as Christians we are called to nurture and protect all children as best we can. So I've had some trouble sleeping these last few nights... It's hard for me to drift off in my

comfortable bed when thoughts of frightened, crying children locked up in converted warehouses fill my head. What can a mustard seed do for them?

In case that's not enough to make us feel overwhelmed and discouraged and maybe even hopeless, did you know that today is an anniversary of sorts? It was on June 17th of 2015 that a white supremacist with a .45-caliber handgun massacred nine of our brothers and sisters in Christ who had welcomed him into their Bible study session at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston. That horrific event was only three years ago -- but now, it's no longer the worst mass shooting in an American church, because 26 people were killed at First Baptist in Sutherland Springs, Texas last year. A mustard seed can't bring any of those people back.

With all of this swirling in my head Friday evening, I realized that my perfectly ordinary mustard seed sermon from Monday wasn't going to cut it anymore... I can't stand up here and talk about gardening metaphors with all that's going on in the world.

What on earth can we learn from a mustard seed on this day, in this time? What does a mustard seed have to tell us?

A mustard seed is miniscule, tiny, easy to miss. How can something so small mean anything to us when our challenges are so big?

We could really use some straight talk from Jesus right now, some clear commanding instructions about what he would have us do... but, for today, we have this parable. And it must be an important parable, it must be significant, because it appears in all three synoptic Gospels. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke Jesus tells us that "the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed."

The mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds on earth, grows into a plant that is known not for its marvelous beauty or its immense size but for its tenacity and vitality. Mustard bushes are hardy, and they spread quickly and easily.

Jesus tells us in verse 32 that when that mustard seed develops, it becomes "the greatest of all shrubs." And what makes it so great?

It "puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." The mustard plant is great not because of its size or its beauty but because of its hospitality, because of its inviting and nurturing and life-giving possibilities. This mustard bush is "the greatest of all shrubs" not because the birds can stand around looking at it and being very impressed, but because *they can live in it* -- they can make their homes in it, they can find peace and rest and renewal and strength for another day in its branches. That is the greatness of which Jesus speaks.

His metaphor isn't brand-new, mind you, it's an ancient metaphor, one he probably grew up hearing...

Consider these words of prophecy from Ezekiel:

"I myself will take a sprig  
from the lofty top of a cedar;  
I will set it out.  
I will break off a tender one  
from the topmost of its young twigs;  
I myself will plant it  
on a high and lofty mountain.  
On the mountain height of Israel  
I will plant it,  
in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit,  
and become a noble cedar.  
Under it every kind of bird will live;  
in the shade of its branches will nest  
winged creatures of every kind." (17:22-23)

This is the voice of God making a promise -- to take a tender sprig from the very top of a majestic cedar. God will not take the thickest, strongest branch, God will not fulfill this holy promise through traditional might and power; God will do the unexpected. God's promise will be fulfilled through

the smallest, the most vulnerable, the youngest sprig. That tiny, delicate spark of new life will be planted in holiness, and tended in love, and will grow to redefine greatness... much like a defenseless, crying baby, born in a dirty barn to an unwed teenager; a baby who would grow in faith and save the world with his redeeming love.

This precious little sprig, God says, will become a "noble cedar." And what makes it noble? Is this nobility about size or strength? No, God says, this tree will "produce boughs and bear fruit" and "Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind."

Just like that mustard bush, the "greatest of all shrubs," the cedar's nobility is found in its capacity to host, to serve as a welcoming and nurturing home, a safe haven for God's "winged creatures of every kind." Every kind... picture that: eagles and sparrows, bluebirds and vultures, doves and hawks and those annoying Canadian geese... they all find a home in God's noble cedar. There's room for every bird in this great and holy tree.

Just as Jesus welcomed people of every kind, and enfolded them in his love and light -- men and women, young and old, notorious sinners and devout saints -- every bird has a place in the noble cedar, and every child of God has a place in the Body of Christ. In both the prophecy of the noble cedar and the parable of the mustard seed, greatness and nobility are found in hospitality. These two scriptures, one from centuries before the birth of Christ and one from the time after his death and resurrection, remind us how God defines greatness, where God 'sets the bar' for God's kingdom: not in might, but in vitality; not in size, but in hospitality; not in power, but in peace and promise.

Our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, likes to say that "If it's not about love, it's not about God." Considering today's scriptures, we could say that if it's not life-giving, if it's not hospitable, if it's not nurturing and noble, then it's not the kingdom of God.

So where does that leave us? If we know we're not living in the kingdom of God right here and right now, what can we do?

Do we just complain, or despair, or point fingers and place blame? Do we give up, and decide that the gulf between our world and God's kingdom is simply too wide for us to live out kingdom values in our everyday lives?

We're back to that little mustard seed. That tiny seed may look like a speck of nothing at first, but if we go ahead and plant it, if we plant seeds of God's kingdom whenever and wherever we can, we're planting holy possibilities. If we plant those tiny seeds of love and kindness and compassion, seeds of mercy and peace, and if we trust what Jesus has told us -- trust that those kingdom seeds will grow into greatness and holiness and nobility -- then we are doing our part as his farmers, his disciples. The pain and the hurt and the anger are real, yes, but so are the seeds, and so is the promise.

And if we're confused about how to even begin planting seeds, here's a suggestion: look back to the text of this morning's Collect. Just a few minutes ago, we all prayed for the faith and strength to "proclaim [God's] truth with boldness, and minister [God's] justice with compassion." Boldness and compassion are a holy combination. I started this sermon by telling you about the different things that made me feel discouraged and disheartened every day last week, but I never got to Saturday. Because Saturday was different. On Saturday, I had the privilege of taking part in the Interfaith Peace Walk, which was led by the young people of this city, representing their different faith communities (including Christ Church!). On Saturday, I saw young farmers sowing mustard seeds through their prophetic words and compassionate deeds. They're showing us how it's done, and leading the way for us. Our seeds may be different, yours and mine, but we are all called by our Maker to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly together as we build the kingdom of God, bit by bit, seed by seed.

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed -- a process of growing and living and becoming, with tiny and perhaps unremarkable beginnings, with the vision of a holy nesting place for all of us; a place where we all belong, and

there's always room, there's always welcome, and there's always enough. We don't have to invent the ending; that's in God's hands. But we do have to plant the seeds. Amen.