

Matthew 13: 31-32 “Sacred Seed in Disguise” Rev. Janet Chapman 11/2/25

It was Halloween night and grandkids Mary and Joe were helping their grandfather, the local town minister, get the small church ready for worship Sunday morning. They were bummed they couldn't get an early start on trick or treating so they began to brainstorm what trick they could play on their grandpa instead. He had a good sense of humor and was always pulling pranks on them. As they went to the big Pulpit Bible sitting on the front podium to mark the page for scripture of the day, they noticed something interesting about the placement of the story. The story was about Noah and the Great Flood in Genesis. As they read through the story, flipping the page, they realized what they would do. If they glued two pages together, it would make a far more interesting story when Grandpa flipped the page to continue reading the story on Sunday morning. The next Sunday, he got up to read the text. “Noah took himself a wife and she was...”, he flipped the page to continue, “500 cubits long, 50 cubits wide, and 30 cubits high.” He paused, scratched his head, turned the page back and read it silently, turned the page again and continued reading. Then he looked up at the congregation as his grandkids were laughing so hard they could hardly contain themselves. He said, “You know friends, I've been reading this old Bible for nearly 50 years now, but there are just some things that are really hard to believe.”

We are given a text today which is from Jesus' collection of parables that at first glance seems plausible but after close inspection becomes harder to believe. Parables, at first glance, seem like ordinary stories from first-century Palestinian village life. They appear realistic. But then, as we get into them, there is something odd, something strange that isn't true to life as we know it. Something seems out of whack, off-kilter. It invites us to consider things in our lives that are realistic yet at the same time strange. Once in a Bible study, seminary professor Alyce McKenzie explained parables as such and then asked the adult group if there was something in their experience that was realistic yet strange? One of the women in the class raised her hand and said, “My name is Alma. This is my husband, Ken. I am realistic and Ken

is strange.” It’s actually a pretty good analogy for Jesus’ parables. Each one is an odd marriage of realistic scenes and strange, incongruous, out-of-the-ordinary details.

Such is the case with the parable of the mustard seed. It is only 2 verses long but packs a lot in just a few words. Without much context, Jesus’ audience would have gotten the punch line immediately. Like all punch lines, it comes at the very end with the phrase, “Birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.” The crowd would have associated that phrase with stories about the world’s great kingdoms. In those days, when you talked about “kingdoms” you talked about large trees such as in Psalm 104, “The trees of the Lord are well watered, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted. There the birds make their nests, the stork has its home in the junipers.” This wasn’t just a praise of creation, it was an image of what massive empires would be like. Jesus’ audience undoubtedly thought of Rome, which was occupying the land at the time. Rome was a giant cedar, one of the great kingdoms of all time. Everyone paid attention to it, towering over all other life, much like the California redwoods and sequoias, whose roots grow deep and branches reach tall. Jesus takes such an image and sets it up as a comparison to a tiny seed, the tiniest seed his audience would have ever seen, which usually grows into a bush, not a tree. But this bush exceeds all expectations and grows into a redwood-like tree, solidly rooted and big enough for birds to make their nests. This is what the kingdom of heaven is like.

If you still have your notes from high school English class, you may remember this as a figure of speech called a metaphor – talking about one thing by referring to another, getting at the meaning of one thing by comparing it to another. Sometimes the comparisons are familiar like, “her eyes were as blue as the sky.” Other times, the comparisons are jarring or startling like, “her eyes were as blue as a bruise or as blue as a wave just before it breaks.” When the comparisons catch us by surprise, they make us stop and think. Our everyday understanding of things is broken open and we are invited to explore them all over again, to go inside of them and see what is new. Jesus did it all the time, especially in Matthew’s Gospel, taking ordinary things and letting us see the sacred in disguise. Sinners are like lost sheep, the word of God is

like seed sown on different kinds of ground, the kingdom of heaven is like leaven placed inside bread dough, the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, the smallest of seeds, but when it is full-grown, it is more like a tree than a bush, towering over the kingdoms all around it.

What is striking about these images is their hiddenness, such as the tiny mustard seed being hidden in the ground. If the kingdom of heaven is like this, then it isn't something readily apparent to the eye but something that must be searched for, something just below the surface of things waiting to be discovered and embraced. Sometimes that which is quite small, ordinary, and common can be life-saving at the same time. Several years ago, an expensive laboratory jet was approaching Edwards Air Force Base when the landing gear didn't respond. The co-pilot traced the problem to a faulty relay panel. He hunted for something to bypass the relay and activate the nose gear. He found a paper clip, bent it so that it bypassed the problem and triggered the nose gear. It worked like a charm, saving the expensive jet from a crash landing. At that moment, the lowly paper clip was more important than all the rest of the sophisticated equipment on the plane. Likewise, living within God's kingdom often starts out in common and hidden aspects, barely detectable, but then proves its worth with astounding results. By sharing such an image, Jesus is teaching us that God's realm was never meant to be a big showy event; its power is not based in numbers, popularity, politics or nations. Its towering effects aren't realized in squashing or minimizing the beliefs of others, but in the adaptable, lowly practice of love for God and others. Humility over bigotry, inclusion over exclusion, diversity over sameness are all being spoken through Jesus' telling of this tiny, powerful metaphor.

The greatness of the mustard seed is often overlooked not just because of its smaller size, but also because it produces a straggly looking bush with weed-like reproduction. In the realm of plants, it lacks beauty and spreads so quickly that it has been compared to the dreaded kudzu of the south which people spend thousands of dollars to eradicate in their gardens. It will literally consume a crop within a couple years and is known to overtake the highest garden walls. Although it has little yellow

flowers and flavorful leaves with nutritional value, it wouldn't be chosen for an ornamental garden. It almost always grows wild, but here's the thing – Jesus doesn't care how pretty the plant is. Apparently, Jesus is just fine with ill-mannered, bushy, homely plants that no one would pick to landscape their garden. You may know people whose faith is like that, too? They are a little on the wild side, a bit unconventional. They are the ones who ask the far-out questions in Bible studies, the ones that make me run to my theological library to search for an answer. Maybe they are not the stateliest tree in the garden, yet their faith grows and grows, but not in the traditional ways we expect. They don't care where the garden wall was built, they are going to reach out over it and extend a welcoming and inviting hand to anyone who passes by. They show up to help, always willing to lend a hand where and when it is needed, generous in their time, talents, and resources. On this All Souls Day when we remember those who have been like saints in our lives, you might be able to name a few people you have known who have had this kind of mustard-bush faith.

In Jesus' parable, it is the modest mustard plant, not the towering cedar, that communicates God's realm being realized in the midst of the ordinary. It is there that the birds of the air find relief and rest, which Jesus' audience would have understood to be the gathering of the Gentile nations into the people of God altogether as one community. It is there that some of us, whose faith is no bigger than... well, a mustard seed, also find our place. Our tiny seeds are not much to look at, nothing much happening, not even a plant yet. It's just a seed, easily dropped and lost. But Christ holds out his hand to receive that little seed and we learn to trust him to coax from it new life, new hope from that smallest bit of faith. No seed is too small to escape the notice of the Divine Gardener who helps us to grow and willingly share our gifts, to share relief to the most vulnerable and in need. That is the beauty of God's landscape of faith for the kingdom is like these things; it is found in these things. No matter how hard all of this is to believe, there is room for everyone and these are the places to look for the will, the dreams, and the presence of God. Amen.