

## “Parable of the Mustard Seed”

Date: August 4, 2019

Place: Lakewood UMC

Theme: Faith, small deeds great rewards

Occasion: Short Stories by Jesus, series

Texts: Matthew 17:20; Mark 4:30-32; Matthew 13:31-32; Luke 13:18-19

We have before us this morning three different versions of the same parable told by three different gospel writers. In two of them it is claimed that the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds. In one parable it becomes a large bush and in two of the versions it morphs into a tree. In all three, it is large enough that the birds will come and perch on its branches.

Did Jesus tell the parable different ways on different occasions, or did the gospel writers each tell the story in their own way, either remembering it differently, or each with a unique purpose? We'll never know for sure. And because the details seem to vary from gospel to gospel, maybe they are not the key to understanding its meaning.

For traditional commentators, the smallness of the seed suggests the miraculous growth of the kingdom, whether in one's heart, or in the church, or in society. It is a message of encouragement. The seemingly insignificant acts of work and witness by the disciples of Jesus are still of ultimate importance, and not to be minimized.

Another interpretation thinks it means the message of salvation is extended beyond its original audience to include all of the nations of the world – the birds of the air representing the gentiles who take shelter in the church.

Still another sees the mustard seed not in a positive light, but in a sinister way, asserting that the mustard plant is a despised and rejected weed. It is dangerous because it threatens to take over the garden. Seen not as a commentary on religious piety, but rather on politics, this interpret-

tation says that the garden is the empire, and the mustard plant is the church which will destroy the garden by taking it over. This view is certainly edgy and provocative, but is not widely supported.

Just a couple of observations from Rabbi Amy-Jill Levine, and then I want to jump quickly to what the parable might have meant, then and now. Rabbi Levine informs us that the mustard seed is *not* the smallest of seeds – orchid and cypress seeds are smaller. As well, mustard seeds do not grow into giant trees; at most they grow into a plant about 8 to 10 feet tall at most. To describe it as a tree is generous.

Nevertheless, we can all grant that the seed is small, even if we can't agree on whether the Bible is a scientific textbook giving precise botanical information. There is one slight problem, though. Nowhere in Greek, Roman or Jewish culture is the smallness of a mustard seed known in a proverbial way. It's known for its sharp taste, its medicinal benefits and its rapid growth, but nobody makes a big deal about its size, except for Jesus.

So what do we know? Jesus tells a parable about a small seed, whether it is the smallest or not isn't the point. It sprouts into some form of vegetation – either a bush or a small tree, and it grows to a size large enough to shelter birds.

The parable does mark a contrast between small and great. But, Rabbi Levine says the traditional view, that the parable means great outcomes arrive from small beginnings is correct, but is somewhat trivial. "Yeah, yeah, so what?"

To note what *outcomes* might occur provides better provocation. Mustard is curative, having healing properties, and it is available to all. From small acts of kindness and love, healing can be brought to the world.

On another note, like the vast amount of bread the woman baked, the mustard plant offers more than a single person can use. We might therefore conclude that blessings have a way of multiplying, benefitting not just one person but many people, over and over again.

The invitation is to partake of its benefits; its branches reaching out and are available to any and all of the birds that might flock to it.

The parable speaks of the significance of the seed: that one seed grew into a large plant. Thus, no seed is, or should be, seen as insignificant. Each one contains life within it. There is potential in every life to be a blessing to others and thus to the world.

And here is the interpretation I like the best – even small actions, or hidden actions, have the potential to produce great things. So many times, we have the tendency to say, “I’m just one person; what can I do? The problems of the world are so great; what difference can I make?”

Jesus is provoking us to action, even if is a small act of kindness. We may never know what great benefit one small thing we do can have upon the world. Your act of kindness – with a smile, or a card, or phone call – just might be the thing that someone needed that day.

Perhaps they were on the verge of suicide and you called. They knew they were not alone; they knew they had a friend; they knew that they mattered. And instead of killing herself or himself, they decide to live. And who knows what good they might bring to the world because they lived instead of died that day.

You may not be able to end world hunger by yourself. But you can walk in the CROP Walk on September 15<sup>th</sup>. Hundreds of people walking, hundreds of people donating money, giving to agencies that help to feed

the starving in our own community and around the world. Your walking, your giving, though small, can make a difference.

You may not be able to end homelessness by yourself. But you can give to EUMA, our United Methodist Mission in Erie. Your small gift, multiplied many times over by others giving their small gift – it all adds up.

That friend you invite to come to church with you, just a small act. But that friend may hear a word in church, their heart strangely warmed, and they give their life to God. Who knows if there is a future pastor, missionary, Sunday school teacher, or Bible study leader, waiting to be invited to church?

It's such a small thing. But who knows the impact of small acts of faith, our small acts of kindness and love, our small acts of generosity and caring. This week – open the door for someone else; let someone else into the line of traffic, smile at the person behind the cash register; send a card, make a phone call, volunteer your time. Or, as Mother Theresa put it, “don't try to do great things, rather do small things with great love.”

Don't feel that your effort is too small to make a difference. No seed should be seen as insignificant. Each one contains life within it. There is potential in every life to be a blessing - to others and thus to the world. If you have the faith of a mustard seed, you can do great things, one little thing at a time. Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from *Short Stories by Jesus* by Amy-Jill Levine. Harper Collins Publishing: NY, NY, 2014, “The Mustard Seed,” pp. 165-182.