

The Significance of the Insignificant

Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, (July 26) 2020

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Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble.

- John Lewis

Many of you will recall that legend has it that the Apostle Peter was bald-headed due to his scratching his head trying to figure out Jesus' parables. Well, in today's lectionary reading from Matthew, Jesus is teaching some head-scratching parables.

Teaching in parables was an essential method of teaching by rabbis, in which the form of parables was important, not just the content. Parabolic teaching invites participatory learning and reflection. Parables are not intended for abstract learning; they're not theoretical. Parables summon the listener's critical thinking skills – your mind has to get involved – but more importantly, parables are about everyday life, and to be understood, the listener must live them out. The understanding comes in the practice. Not just your mind but you have to get involved. And the more you practice them, the more they work on you and in you. They'll make you bald-headed. But they'll also turn you into a Christian, as you practice, practice, practice them. And it is why Jesus' parabolic method is fitting

with everything else he does – to know him we must follow him, and not simply think about him or discuss him or write papers or read books about him.

Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of ...shrubs.” A shrub. A bush. Not a towering redwood, not a spreading chestnut, nor a big oak, and not even a nice fruit tree. Just a bush. Both Daniel and Ezekiel in the Old Testament thought the kingdom of God would be a cedar, about as big a tree as existed in the ancient Middle East. But Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a bush? What’s going on here, Jesus?”

We American Christians want to think of God’s kingdom a bit more triumphantly than a mustard bush. As Wendell Berry says, “We want to be somebody.” Surely, God’s Reign has more substance to it than comparing it to shrubs and bushes and the smallest of all seeds? Mustard bushes are small and squatty. Furthermore, they do not put forth large branches so that the birds of the air can make nests in their shade like Jesus said. I have no doubt that Jesus knew what he was talking about and so did his listeners. They likely knew he was parodying the imagery of Daniel and Ezekiel who said, “Under [the cedar] every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind” (Ezekiel 17:23). Nothing like some humor from Jesus to remind us what God’s Way looks like and how it acts. A little humor deflates our inflated view of ourselves.

Mustard bushes and yeast in flour are all about humility. Smallness. But Jesus is also talking about slowness. Patience. We talked a lot about patience last week with the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds. Suffice it to say this week, that being mustard seeds and mustard bushes, yeast in flour are also about patience and

humility. Impatience is always about control. But the smallest of all seeds is not in control. That's why we learn to root our lives in Christ with such depth that we can trust him and his Way. We're in this with him for the long haul and by following him, by practicing, practicing, practicing, and by allowing him to teach us and form us by parables, we learn what Stanley Hauerwas calls the "significance of the insignificant."

But these insignificant little seeds growing into squatty bushes growing low to the ground, are also highly invasive, persistent, and hard to get rid of. Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove likes to say that mustard bushes are sort of like the South's ubiquitous kudzu: it grows everywhere and takes over everything. I grew up in West Texas where mesquite could take over a ranch pasture in no time, if left unchecked. Here, in East Texas it might be like our Bahia Grass, sometimes known as Aggie Grass since they invented it. You know how Bahia Grass grows and spreads – a sprig here and a sprig there and pretty soon your entire yard is taken over by it. It's almost impossible to eradicate. It's persistent. It spreads everywhere. It's a lot like mustard seeds and mustard bushes.

But there was another characteristic of mustard. Roman historian Pliny the Elder, who died in AD 79, said its pungent taste was often used for seasoning in food but it was also used as a medicine. He said, "Pounded it is applied with vinegar to the bites of serpents and scorpion stings. It counteracts the poisons of fungi... For toothache it is chewed. It is very beneficial for all stomach troubles."

So, this ordinary and smallest of all seeds can spread like wildfire and be an instrument of healing, all at the same time. How interesting.

Perhaps what this old world needs is not another ruling empire and another narcissistic dictator, not correct or better information, not a return to some sort of

moral law, not new scientific discoveries, nor faster economic growth. Maybe what is needed today is the same thing needed in the first century: healing.

Could it be that through this small and ordinary seed, God seeks to bring healing to this broken and warring world? Could it be through such small churches as Austin Heights God seeks to bring healing to Nacogdoches?

What a difference this makes in our posture and our approach to people and problems. We don't have to make things come out right and we don't have to correct people. We don't have to straighten up the mess or organize the chaos or be the enlightener. We don't have to work to regain control. We don't have out-debate or out-argue anyone. All we have to do is become instruments of God's healing presence. Being healers is humbling and gentling. We speak out and tell the truth about injustice, but our goal is healing, not vengeance.

And I'm convinced that there is a connection between being small and humble and healing. When we are big and successful and wealthy and powerful there is a tendency to get confused over who is doing the healing. Furthermore, we get to thinking that we can bring healing with our own plans and organizations.

But with the small and humble there is no doubt that it is God who heals. Being small and humble means we do not have the expertise or resources to put together some big healing campaign. All we are to do is be who God calls us to be: the smallest of all seeds, the greatest of all bushes, healing the hurting and bringing wholeness to the divided and the broken. We can be patient and gentle because God brings about the healing through our small and ordinary actions. We don't have to prove anything. We don't have to be successful. We don't have to force things; we don't coerce. All we need to do is trust God.

Kay Chism told me several years ago that from time to time she had parents who were Christian who wanted to withdraw their child from Kay's classroom in order to put them in private schools where the children would be in a more protected Christian environment. But Kay told them that perhaps God places our children in the classroom as a witness, to be a leader for good, to be a quality student. Kay told me that time and time again, a good, quality student could change the atmosphere of an entire class just by being there and doing good work. The child becomes leaven for the whole class. The significance of the insignificant.

God's Way is quiet, small, slow, and humble, yet persistent and unrelenting. God does not give up, and neither do we. God has chosen to change the world through the lowly, the unassuming, and the imperceptible. This has always been God's Way. God chose a ragged bunch of slaves God set free from the Egyptian Empire to become insurgents of God's New Way in a new land. God chose 300 with Gideon, carrying lamps and blowing horns to put to flight the most powerful army of the Assyrian Empire. God chose a shepherd boy with a slingshot to become the greatest of God's kings. And God invaded this dark, deathly world as a baby in a cowshed, in an overlooked town, in a backwater region of the Roman Empire incarnating God's Way of Life and Healing. This is who we are called to follow and the Way we are called to practice and embody.

New Testament scholar and great preacher Brian Blount uses his imagination with these agrarian parables of chapter 13 of Matthew. He says he was looking over the book, *The Gospel in Art by the Peasants of Solentiname*, which is a book of art done by peasants in Central America back in the 1980's. Blount says he looked at a painting of a peasant sowing seeds in a field and like the sower in the parable earlier in Matthew, the peasant is throwing seed everywhere. Then, Blount says, it hit him that the peasant is flinging seeds, not in an empty plowed

field ready for seed, but in a field already full of crops. The crops are already growing in neat rows, clean from weeds. Everything has been planted with precision. It is growing in neat, patterned, almost geometrically designed rows. And Blount asks himself, what's going on here? Why is the peasant flinging seeds everywhere in a field so neat and already lined up with vegetation?

Then he said, he realized that the peasant, the sower, is trespassing. He's not supposed to be here. Like the second agrarian parable in Matthew 13, this peasant has crept into someone else's farm and is sowing weeds everywhere, disrupting the carefully manicured patterns of the field.

But what if the trespassing sower is not sowing weeds but sowing mustard seeds from our third Matthew parable? From the perspective of the corporate owner of this big, neatly organized, regimented, industrialized farm, these mustard seeds will intrude and invade and spread everywhere, disrupting the cash crops, cutting into his profits, and messing up his plans. From the owner's perspective the mustard seeds are weeds, they are a threat.

So, what if this peasant is sowing seeds of healing and repair? In this imperial regimented agribusiness, the gospel sower is flinging seeds that will sit seditiously under the soil until they spring forth with rapidly spreading life and healing, mercy and grace. Little, squatty bushes. Nothing big. But spreading like a virus: a Life-virus, not a death-virus (see Brian K. Blount, *Invasion of the Dead: Preaching Resurrection*, p. 82-83).

Catie Munguia, wife of Kike, mother of Jade, and daughter of Ray and Jenny Johnston, spent several years in El Salvador doing a lot of local advocacy work, much of it focused on anti-gold mining campaigns. CRIPDES, the organization for which she worked, started in the 80's during the brutal

dictatorships that were supported by the U.S. In those days, it was important to have gringos present in villages to be a witness against violence and brutality against the people, as well as provide a kind of buffer. If a gringo was present, often the village was somewhat protected. It was also a way for local villages to connect to U.S. communities.

After the war ended in 1992, the work transformed and grew into doing local organizing, women's micro-credit, growing kitchen gardens, teaching hygiene and eventually, local democracy where villages practice referendums on issues of importance like trying to keep gold mining out. Villages doing grassroots democracy where the whole town shows up and debates, discusses, and votes.

In the 1980's when these mustard seeds were being spread under the noses of right-wing dictatorships who knew how they would grow? All of them, bushes not trees, bringing healing and wholeness. And in our case, bringing us Catie and Kike and Jade.

The significance of the insignificant.

In the early and mid-1940's apartheid in South Africa was hardening. For example, one of the customs was that if a black person met a white person on the road or sidewalk, the black person must stop and tip their hat and bow to the white person. If the sidewalk was narrow the black person was to step out in the street and tip their hat and bow while the white person passed. There was a new Anglican priest from England named Trevor Huddleston, who was already establishing a reputation among black of South Africans of being faithful to Christ, so much so they gave him the name, *Makhalipile* ("dauntless one"). One day Trevor Huddleston passed a black mother and her nine-year-old son. Before she could step in the ditch, he tipped his hat to the mother and stepped off of the sidewalk to let

them pass. He didn't say anything or do anything else but go on about his business. The nine-year-old boy was so impressed by the simple act of a white minister "doffing" his hat (as they say in South Africa) to his black mother, that he never forgot it. In fact, he caused him to go into the Anglican priesthood himself. He grew up to become Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

Years later, Tutu wrote, "The fact that black people still talk to white people in South Africa, which is an extraordinary miracle in South Africa, then it is because in large part due to people like Trevor who made us realize that we too count, we matter in the sight of God, we too – even when we are black – are people to whom hats ought to be doffed."

Who knows what might grow from a simple mustard seed?

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all.