

Sermon † June 13, 2021

Mark 4:26-34

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A number of years ago I received a very nice birthday gift from my Mary. It was a book and a cassette tape. (Cassette tape give you a clue as to how long ago it was.) Anyway, the book contained beautiful photographs of shoreline scenes around Lakes Michigan and Superior. And the accompanying tape was easy listening, new-age kind of music that has been composed and recorded by the photographer. Ideally, while listening to the music one would carefully peruse the photographs and thus be transported to some magical spot along one of these great lakes. It was a great gift.

Weeks later, I was in a book store and happened to notice the same book/cassette set. First of all, I was astonished by the price. But the packaging was incredible. The cassette tape and paperback book were packaged in a large, shiny cardboard folder that tended to make the entire set look much larger than it was (not a criticism of the gift...but rather an observation). It is kind of typical of the way we package things in this country. I'm sure you have had similar experiences with items you've purchased.

A number of years ago, Princess Margaret was about to embark upon a visit to the United States. Shortly before leaving England, she was offered some words of advice from one of London's foremost journalists of the day, Alan

Whicker. He said to her, *"allow ten percent for the oversell."*

The columnist went on to say that America suffers from the enormous disadvantage of being oversold. Our packaging is brilliant and our advertising is superb. But so often the actuality doesn't quite live up to the advertisement. We have an entire generation of children who are never quite satisfied . . . because they expected more or better or bigger.

Then there is the evangelist who advertises: "Revival for body and soul . . . miracles nightly."

We have a tendency to substitute size for quality and if we can say that the thing is biggest we assume at once that we have said something very important.

This brings us to this delightful story that Jesus told about the kingdom of God. One only has to read but a portion of the New Testament to realize that Jesus thought the kingdom was about as important as anything he talked about. In confirmation class, we teach that the *kingdom* is God's rule or reign in the lives of God's people. And that parables give us glimpse of what it will be like in this kingdom. In today's parable, Jesus says that it is like a grain of mustard seed which begins small and is not spectacular. Its greatness comes as we enter into its meaning and see how this small seed grows into a great tree.

Think of this parable in terms of our nation. The United States began as a grain of mustard seed with nothing very impressive except dreams and hopes. A quick reading of the early history of this country reveals numerous parallels between America's beginnings and some of the new nations in

Africa and South America. Our forefathers and mothers sometimes did foolish things and said foolish things because they were inexperienced. There was no indication that this was to be a great nation of the future. This country and its people was as a seed with great potential.

If we move fast forward to the present day we need to consider the danger that faces us with our great size and our huge population. Does our strength and our wealth tend to make us substitute quantity for quality?

So many are troubled today by the disintegration of our spiritual life and the decline of our moral standards. We are substituting the skill of overselling for the slow and painful production of a life of quality. We need to learn, once again, the value of understatement and the virtue of underselling. We need a new awareness of the importance of quality.

So where does the church fit into all of this? There is no need to argue the extent to which the founding mothers and fathers were religious. It was a great part of our early history. And religious freedom (and tolerance) is still very much a part of who we are.

And yet, given all of this, we must remember the task of the church is to speak to its' society in terms of the small, unseen things that are the decisive matters. We need to teach our society this lesson by demonstrating it in the life of the Christian church.

Another word from newspaperman, Whicker: "Creating false appetites, based usually on the fears that reside in all of us, is one of the wickedest things that can be laid against modern people." Thinking big is a Christian virtue... but trying to think big about tiny, unimportant matters tends to become a national vice.

Let us take care so as not to get caught up in this kind of thinking. We do it when we are concerned with how many have attended a particular event, instead of considering what may have happened at the event. We do it when we question the motives of others, "*what is so-and-so doing in our church.*"

The parable of the mustard seed contains a great truth for all of us. It is about being judgmental. It is about making assumptions. It is about trying to second guess.

It is about rejoicing in the possibilities that may come of small, insignificant events or encounters.

It is about being open and flexible. It is about our relationship to God.

Jesus said, the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed and do you know what? That ain't bad. Amen.