

Mustard Seed Faith

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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So many questions – so many. In Mark's Gospel story the disciples often didn't get it; I don't either, honestly. Using the mustard plant in this parable. Mark mentions "the kingdom of God" 14 times. But Kingdom in Jesus' time was always equated with domination. It causes us to wonder: why Jesus of the Gospels seems so often to flip the conventional concept of a "kingdom" upside down – he reimagines it. I, and many preachers, use the word "kin-dom" instead, so never imply that God's vision is one of domination.

Scattering of seeds carelessly, extravagantly doesn't seem like a tyrant's act, quite the opposite. That sower does not look methodical, or calculated; more carefree. Parables are about God, our world and us.

Parables, Don Saliers suggests, "...continually break open our understanding of the reign of God."¹ Parables stir our imagination, they hold concepts in tension, and are intended to elude definition.

Scholars certainly have wondered over the centuries about Jesus using a mighty mustard plant to convey greatness. I'm no botanist but I'm pretty certain that mustard plants are not "mighty" – perhaps cedars, great, tall pines, mighty oaks. Matthew and Luke both include the mustard seed parable in their Gospels; but in their version, Jesus calls it a mustard tree. Well, it's a mystery.

Size is not at all needed for something to be powerful. Consider the intellectual giant Mahatma Gandhi, the commitment of Mother Teresa, the wisdom that is Yoda. In that tiny mustard seed is great power waiting to be unleashed.

It takes me back to that elementary school project, placing the bean in the wet paper towel in a jar, waiting...waiting. The excitement I felt one morning when it had begun to sprout.² Tracey planted her cucumber and peas, and beans. The Kin-dom is like that – waiting, watering, but otherwise the timing and the ultimate work is God's grace.

God's kin-dom is full of mystery, and can be quite frustrating, because God's time is not at all like our sense of time. When I was very little, I enjoyed my tea with my grandfather. I wanted to grow up and have all the stuff adults had: cars, money, making big decisions. My Grandpa tried to teach me about life on the golf course. I wasted no time putting the ball on the tee, then I swung as hard as my little muscles could muster – and into the trees went my ball. Grandpa, he would take forever getting settled, waiting...waiting. Then he would hit it, nothing brilliant, but straight as an arrow. He often made par.

¹ Don E. Saliers, "Pastoral Perspective." Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Year B, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).

² David Schnasa Jacobsen, commentary on Mark 4:26-34. June 13, 2021.
<https://www.workingpreacher.org>

Here I am, 40 years later, still learning those lessons: Patience; Intentionality; the Power that is in slowness. I think that woven into the mystery of Jesus' "kin-dom of God" parables is the mystery of God's timing. Not ours.

In their commentary on this parable, one scholar reflects on the George Floyd murder trial. We know how it ended. But you wouldn't have been sure what the verdict would be. Numerous bystanders had taken cell phone videos, you could see people pleading with the officer to stop. It seemed to no avail. One witness in the trial who watched in horror felt guilt at not being able to do more.

Those witnesses watching Mr. Floyd die must have felt hopeless, then there still was frustration during the trial, wondering: *Will we see justice come?* We might remember the tension in Minneapolis, and around the world, awaiting that final verdict on April 20th. Perhaps real justice did not come that day, but accountability did. The lead prosecutor said: the bystanders were a "bouquet of humanity."³

God's kin-dom, mysterious and powerful. Maybe Jesus was intentional about using a mustard shrub; maybe Jesus was the very embodiment of that parable. Not big, physically strong, but his Message still transforms lives. Perhaps we too are most powerful and transformative when we patiently await God's kin-dom coming, and when we are ready to help. Amen.

³ Ibid Jacobsen commentary