

## ***“The Magic Mustard Seed”***

Sermon for First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Decatur GA

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, June 17, 2018

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### **Mark 4: 26-33**

#### **The Parable of the Growing Seed**

[Jesus...] said, ‘The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.’

#### **The Parable of the Mustard Seed**

He also said, ‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.’

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it.

### **2 Corinthians 5: 6-10, 14-17**

<sup>6</sup>So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord— <sup>7</sup>for we walk by faith, not by sight. <sup>8</sup>Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. <sup>9</sup>So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. <sup>10</sup>For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

<sup>14</sup>For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore, all have died. <sup>15</sup>And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. <sup>16</sup>From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. <sup>17</sup>So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

### ***Everything Starts Small***

This past week we offered a Vacation Bible School  
to children in the church and community.  
Our VBS was entitled Rolling River Rampage.

We were blessed to have 16 or 17 children every morning,  
as well as a dozen church members and friends  
who volunteered to make this a special experience.

The kids ranged from 3 to 7 years old.

They had arts and crafts; music and body movement; and Spanish classes.

One morning I passed by Church Organist Kathy Westbrook's music class.

I paused by the open door to watch.

The 3 and 4-year-old class was up and moving

with Kathy and Music Director William Garner,

going 'round and 'round the room in a circle as they sang.

"Wave your arms!" she instructed. "Now spin around! What do you want to do now?"

"Let's do cartwheels!" said William.

I could not resist.

"If y'all do cartwheels, I'll give you half my salary."

Every morning started out here in the sanctuary

with singing and Bible storytelling to set the day's theme.

Rivers and bodies of water featured in most of the Bible stories I got to tell.

Jesus called his disciples while they were casting nets for fish.

"Follow God, and I will make you fishers of people," He said.

Jesus visited families in seaside villages and folks down by the riverside.

On Wednesday morning,

I told the children the story of Zacchaeus,

who lived in Jericho, a city on the Jordan River.

Zacchaeus learned how much God loved him,

even when he felt unlovable.

I went on to say that sometimes we don't feel lovable or like no one likes us,

but that God always loves us,

and calls us to love one another.

Anna Strickland told me afterward

that a child sitting next to her believed I was saying I didn't feel lovable,

She whispered just loud enough for Anna to overhear,

"Oh, don't be sad. I like you."

### ***Everything Starts Small***

Christ's love of those of us who sometimes feel unlovable

is seen in the word of encouragement he offers in parable form.

The kingdom of God is like when the least of all the seeds, a mustard seed,

is sown and grows to become a tree, one greater than any herb tree.

Small beginnings are natural.

Just about everything worthwhile, no matter how great or fantastic or magnificent,  
started out with a small beginning.

Everything must have a small beginning.

Nothing emerges full-grown.

Jesus said, *“How shall we find something with which to compare the Kingdom of God, or what picture will we use to represent it?”*

*It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown upon the ground,*

*is the least of all the seeds upon the earth.*

*But, when it is sown, it springs up and it becomes greater than all the herbs; and it sends out great branches so that the birds of the heaven can find a lodging under its shade.”*

Three observations.

Interestingly enough:

these points would have been immediately recognizable to anyone who heard Jesus tell the parable live.

**First, in Palestine a grain of mustard seed stood proverbially as the smallest possible thing.**

For example, to say, “faith as a grain of mustard seed”

is to say, “the smallest conceivable amount of faith can move mountains.”

A teeny-tiny mustard seed can grow to become a large, leafy, bushy tree.

**Further, in the Hebrew Scriptures**

**one of the most common ways to describe an empire**

**is to use the analogy of a tree with wide branches,**

**branches in which birds can nest**

**and find shade, shelter, companionship, and food.**

You might consider that Jesus is saying

that the parable is about the empire of the church.

The church began with one individual, Jesus Christ,

then grew to include a baker’s dozen or more of followers,

and has grown to touch every continent on the world today.

**Our third observation is that the end as well as the beginning of the growth of the kingdom are God’s doing and not our own.**

This parable about the kingdom of God is just that:

the domain of God.

Jesus teaches that the growth of God’s beloved community

takes place apart from human effort and human understanding.

We’re to be grateful recipients of God’s love and care.

We’re to do all we can to be faithful and to share God’s love.

Remember that it’s God’s grace, God’s love in action,

not us, who is responsible for growth.

### ***Everything Starts Small***

“There is an old Chinese tale of a woman whose only son died.

“In her grief, she went to the holy man and said,

‘What prayers, what magical incantations do you have  
to bring my son back to life?’

Instead of sending her away or reasoning with her,

he said to her, ‘Fetch me a mustard seed  
from a home that has never known sorrow.

We will use it to drive the sorrow out of your life.’

The woman set off at once in search of that magical mustard seed.

She came first to a splendid mansion,

knocked at the door, and said,

‘I am looking for a home that has never known sorrow.  
Is this such a place? It is very important to me.’

They told her, ‘You’ve certainly come to the wrong place,’

and began to describe all the tragic things that had recently befallen them.

The woman said to herself,

‘Who is better able to help these poor unfortunate people than I,  
who have had misfortune of my own?’

She stayed to comfort them,

then went on in her search for a home that had never known sorrow.

But wherever she turned, in hovels and in palaces,

she found one tale after another of sadness and misfortune.

Ultimately, she became so involved in ministering to other people’s grief

that she forgot about her quest for the magical mustard seed,  
never realizing that it had in fact driven the sorrow out of her life.”

[Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, (1981), Pages 110–11.]

### ***Everything Starts Small***

Give God credit and awe.

Trust God to be the prime source for fresh starts & new creations.

Admiral Richard Byrd was in the Antarctic in 1934

when he wrote the following in his diary:

*“I took my daily walk at 4 p.m. today in 89-degree frost.*

*I paused to listen to silence...*

*The day was dying, the night was being born, but with peace...*

*Here were imponderable processes and forces of the cosmos,*

*harmonious and soundless. Harmony, that was it!*

*That was what came out of the silence --*

*a gentle rhythm, the strain of a perfect chord, the music of the spheres, perhaps.*

*In that instant I could feel no doubt [humanity's] oneness with the universe.*

*The conviction that came that that rhythm was too orderly, too harmonious,  
too perfect to be a product of blind chance...*

*that, therefore, there must be purpose in the whole  
and that humanity was part of the whole process  
and not an accidental off-shoot.*

*It was a feeling that transcended reason;*

*that went to the heart of human despair and found it groundless.*

*The universe was a cosmos, not a chaos;*

*[humanity] was as rightly a part of that cosmos as were the day and night."*

(Richard Byrd, The Uses of Solitude)

### ***Everything Starts Small***

The parable of the Mustard Seed reminds us that the kingdom of God  
starts out small and grows incredibly large.

Even though the ending and the beginning are God's doing and not our own,  
God has chosen to work through us.

God is responsible for life and for growth; our challenge is to believe in it.

The Roman scholar Cato

began to study Greek when he was over 80 years old.

He was asked why he tackled such a difficult task at his age.

Cato replied, "It is the earliest age I have left."

It's never too early or too late to launch a new beginning,

to start afresh in life,

to allow the seed of God's love to be planted in your soul.

Jesus has confidence in the discipleship of his flawed followers.

We are imperfect (our own Minnie Haynes says, "Pobody's perfect.").

The Spirit of God trusts that we can and will do the right thing.

We'll get into the flow of God's way,

We'll follow God's wake in the rolling river.

Christ's confidence in the whole people of God

is seen in His word of encouragement in this parable.

The kingdom of God is like when the least of all the seeds is sown

and grows to become greater than all the herbs.

Lord knows, small beginnings are natural.

Think about it.

Everything worthwhile, everything worth doing and being,

no matter how great or fantastic or magnificent,

started with a small beginning,  
something as small as a mustard seed, as an idea,  
as a wink or a smile or a note on a piano  
or a scribbled note on a napkin in a coffee shop.

Everything must have a small beginning.  
Nothing emerges full-grown.

There is a scientific experiment to show the effect of dyes.  
All that's needed is one large, glass vessel of clear water and a little phial of dye.  
Drop by drop the dye is dripped into the vessel of water.  
At first, the dye seems to have no effect at all.  
The water seems not to be changed in the least.  
Then, quite suddenly, the water becomes tinged with color;  
bit by bit the color deepens;  
soon the whole container of water is transformed.  
The repeated drops of dye produce the effect to change the vessel of water.  
This is the story of transformation in the human context.  
As Paul said, "*...if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation:  
everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*"

So, take heart!  
Do not become discouraged when frustrated  
with the slow, sometimes glacial pace of change,  
with the meanness and mayhem, the madness and monsters.  
We act like there is some great mystery to how to change the world around us.  
This is one mystery you and I can solve here and now.  
The mystery of the magic mustard seed is disclosed.  
Social change begins here and now.  
Jesus went to his hometown down by the riverside and said,  
*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.  
God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the  
blind,  
to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*  
And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down.  
*The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.  
Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*  
(Luke 4: 18-21)

### **Everything Starts Small**

Today our children lead us in song, singing,  
"He's got the whole world in His hands."

We know some songs, too.

“Down by the riverside, I’m gonna lay down my sword and shield.”

“Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.”

“If I had a hammer, I’d hammer out justice.

If I had a bell, I ring out freedom.

If I had a song, I’d sing about love between my brothers and my sisters.

Well, I’ve got a hammer, and a bell to ring, and a song to sing.”

So do you.

So do we all.

God is about to do a new thing in you and you and you.

One plus one plus one makes a million.

In families in seaside villages

and folks down by the riverside,

seeds of love, seeds of hope, seeds of change

have been planted and watered and lit by the Son.

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*