

“God of Small Things”
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – June 13, 2021

Please Read:
Ezekiel 17:22-24
Mark 4:26-34

We would do well to reflect on many of our cultural assumptions. I have grown up with the belief that bigger is better, and driving along Oenoke Ridge Road, I’m guessing that many of our neighbors, if not many of you would find my sermon title highly suspicious. There’s little question that mainstream America is predisposed toward “large and in charge.” *Fortune Magazine* has a list not of the *smallest* 500 corporations, but the *largest* 500 corporations. *Walmart* is the world’s largest corporation, in case you wondered, just above Amazon, Apple and CVS Health ...¹ The United States has the largest corporations in the world, the largest economy in the world, but also the largest amount of energy and product consumption, and the largest external debt in the world ... Whether it’s good for us or not, we Americans seem to have an insatiable appetite for bigger and better.

So it’s quite a jolt to our cultural sensibilities when Jesus says, “the Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed.” The mustard seed is one of the smallest seeds in the world, about .04 inches in diameter. But interestingly, the mustard plant, although it has one of the smallest seeds, can grow into one of the greatest shrubs, even twenty feet high, large enough for birds to make their nests in its branches.

Jesus’ first listeners would have been shocked by comparing the Kingdom of God with a mustard seed. Likely, they would have been aware of the Ezekiel passage Dede read for us, in which God’s action in the world, either despite or on behalf of God’s people, was steeped in images of tall, majestic cedar trees. These are the most noble of all trees and symbolized Israel’s future greatness.

“On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar.”

The image of a God making you and your people the greatest and tallest and most majestic of all would be a comfort and hope to a people under Roman occupation. It certainly would have been a comfort to Ezekiel’s original audience, which was in Babylonian exile at the time. So listening to Jesus speak of what God’s kingdom is like could have been one heck of a pep rally for these folks.

Ezekiel’s image of God making of them a mighty cedar under whose branches all the birds of the air would make nests would have sounded hopeful and strong. Make Israel Great Again is a tempting message. So how do you think they heard Jesus when he 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

¹ *Fortune*, online reference as of Friday, June 11, 2021: <https://fortune.com/fortune500/>.

can make nests in its shade.” Um, hold on—the greatest of all *shrubs*? Technically speaking, to add insult to injury, the mustard plant is a *weed*!

This parable speaks of spectacular growth from insignificant or humble beginnings. Such is the way of the kingdom. According to Nadia Bolz-Weber, it’s God’s way of letting loose a little comic relief on the larger and darker dominating powers that be ...

“It’s like kudzu. God’s word has to be that way because the good news of this kingdom started with the destabilizing humor of a God who comes in the form of a servant. It began with the nobility and majesty of a homeless unwed mother, the joke of the royal greatness of a peasant from an insignificant town. It continued with the honor of God dining with whores and traitors. And the joke continues as a stately procession of a beaten criminal walking toward his execution and the gallantry of a God who dies a pathetic death. And then there is the resurrection: the punch line to the greatest joke in human history. In the end God defeats death itself while we are still offended by the joke.”²

Yes, the gospel turns everything joyfully on its head. Turn the other cheek, go the extra mile. Lose to be found. Die to live. Give to receive. Less is more. Love your enemy. When we are weak, he is strong ... not cedar trees, but mustard seeds. Yes, we worship the God of small things.

In Matthew 17:20, Jesus says if you have *faith* as small as a mustard seed, you can *move mountains* ... The *quantity* of faith is apparently not as important as the *object* of faith. As we put our faith in Jesus Christ, not just with our mouths, but with our lives, reality changes. Our minds change, our priorities change, and so our words and actions change. It’s the butterfly of faith effect. Everything is affected by that turning and putting our faith not in the things or people of this world, but in this One who has done for us that which we cannot do for ourselves.

Faith doesn’t mean we don’t make an effort, but rather we have a very different orientation and motivation. We trust that God loves us, and that God is at work in our lives. Faith in Christ is the mustard seed that makes the Kingdom of Heaven grow in and through even us! Paradoxically, we are then able to focus more on what truly matters in life: family and friends, loving and working not for self-gain but for the glory of God. A smile here, a pat on the back there, a listening ear. Truth told in love. A word of repentance. A word of forgiveness. Sobriety. Writing a letter to say *thank you*. Or *I love you*. It’s amazing what one or two people in your life who are encouraging and positive can do ... I want to commend Veronika for her willingness to be a part of a small confirmation class. Courtney and I pray that the Mustard Seed of your faith, Veronika, will grow and flourish in ways you cannot even imagine now.

The kingdom can seem far away at times, to be sure. Illness strikes, death is still very real, and violence is around us ... The mustard seed sometimes reminds us that the Kingdom of heaven is hidden. But it is here, because - in the midst of it all - is Christ. And wherever there is faith in Christ, the Kingdom will grow ...

² Nadia Bolz-Weber, referenced online June 6, 2021: <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2012-05/sunday-june-17-2012?code=3slJ97n9Pq1sm0DS9Ast>

In Eugene Peterson's book, *The Pastor: A Memoir*, he relays how his experience in a very small seminary community on a quiet side street bordering the "maelstrom of noisy, jostling, harried, secular, cutthroat, competitive New York City" gave him an early insight to the importance of one-on-one relationships in Christian community. It wasn't the big football stadium crowd experiences, but the small, seemingly insignificant Christian community that prepared him for profound transformational ministry in the world. He writes this:

*"I didn't know it at the time, but what absorbed in my subconscious, which eventually surfaced years later, was a developing conviction that the most effective strategy for change, for revolution – at least on the large scale that the kingdom of God involves – comes from a minority working from the margins. I could not have articulated it then, but my seminary experience later germinated into the embrace of a vocational identity as necessarily minority, that a minority people working from the margins has the best chance of being a community capable of penetrating the non-community, the mob, the depersonalized, function-defined crowd that is the sociological norm of America ..."*³

Let's face it folks, we are a small minority community. But make no mistake about the importance and capacity of our influence. Jesus took 12 misfits and changed the world. Count the schools, hospitals, and redeemed lives over the centuries. And now we are called to give faithful witness to God's love for the outsider, the poor and the oppressed. The amazing thing is Jesus continues to turn the world upside down through little people like us! It's the small, simple acts of faith, humble acts of compassion and love that make all the difference ...

The trial of the police officer who killed George Floyd is long since over, but did you read what the lead prosecutor said about the witnesses who felt so small and hopeless in the face of the raw and brutal force that squeezed the life out of that innocent victim? The teenager, EMT, the martial arts expert and the convenience store cashier all pleaded for George's life, and felt that their cries were in vain. But the videos they took went viral, and within weeks literally millions of people around the world marched to declare Black Lives Matter. What you may not have read was what the lead prosecutor said of those first witnesses. Those bystanders were a "bouquet of humanity."⁴

I encourage you to read more about *Jennifer's Law*, recently passed by the house of representatives of CT last week to expand protection of victims of domestic violence. It was one of those few pieces of legislation that won bi-partisan support and will be signed by the governor. It will likely serve as a model for other states. It started with the tragic murder of Jennifer Dulos, a victim of domestic violence. But members of our community and church, in small but impactful ways worked to develop legislation to protect women from domination and control at home so that there wouldn't be more Jennifer Dulos victims ...

³ Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir* (Harper One: New York, 2011), 16.

⁴ Vanessa Romo, "Minnesota Attorney General Calls Chauvin Guilty Verdict First Step in Justice," *NPR*, April 20, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/sections/trial-over-killing-of-george-floyd/2021/04/20/989284035/minnesota-attorney-general-calls-chauvin-guilty-verdict-first-step-in-justice>.

Mustard Seeds, you see, can grow into bouquets of humanity, into something beautiful and life-giving ... Jesus says even as a seed is crushed and dies, so it brings forth new life and a harvest. The Mustard Seed becomes a place for community healing and refreshment!

Our mission statement here at the FPCNC is to live spiritually, love inclusively, learn continuously, and leave a legacy. The question is, are we spiritually focused on the God of Small Things? Are we willing to be servant leaders? To do the small things that really do change the world one life at a time. When the church seems like an irrelevance to the world, at the core of it is the breakdown from trying to be cedars when in fact God wants us to have the faith of a mustard seed. Christianity in our society is too often connected with political power, violent domination, and indifference to those on the margins. But our little Mustard Seed conspiracy should trigger hope and joy through small but life-changing acts of forgiveness, acceptance, and radical self-giving love.

The Kingdom of heaven came into being as God's compassion and grace embodied for us in Jesus Christ. How that laughable little mustard seed of the Kingdom will continue to grow is really about us, about how we will live out our faith, even in the significant cracks and brokenness of our lives and world. Jesus calls you and me to grow the Kingdom in small but faithful ways. May the seeds of our witness grow into a Kingdom sanctuary where others find rest and refreshment. May the Mustard Seeds of God's sometimes hidden, but always faithful work, make us agents of loving transformation for New Canaan and the world.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.