

Sermon for Proper 6 B
The Fourth Sunday After Pentecost
June 17, 2018
The Rev. Paul LeClair

Ezekiel 17:22-24 Psalm 92:1-4,11-14 2 Corinthians 5:6-10,[11-13],14-17 Mark 4:26-34

In the Name of God,
whose power in us, can do infinitely more
than we can ask for or imagine. Amen

- Ephesians 3:20

Often when we hear someone making reference to making a mountain out of a molehill, it's seen as a negative thing. It means that a person is taking a small inconvenience and blowing it up way out of proportion.

As my Mom would have said, "Now, let's not make a Federal case out of it."

However, this week our scripture selections offer us some images of small things growing into grand things, as being a blessing.



Ezekiel described taking a tiny sprig from a lofty cedar tree, and planting it in a new location. With time and nurturing, it grows and develops. More branches sprout and the once tender sapling matures into a mighty shade tree that provides a home for all kinds of God's creatures.

Psalm 92 describes God's children, planted in the house of the Lord, becoming righteous persons who bear much fruit, like a flourishing palm tree.

In a similar manner, Paul reminded the people in the city of Corinth, about something they had likely experienced as new believers.

He told them, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

And then our selection from Mark's Gospel tells how Jesus compared the Kingdom of God, to a mustard seed; one of the smallest of all the seeds on earth.

Yet, when it's sown, it grows up, and becomes a giant shrub that stretches out large branches, so that the birds can make nests in its shade.



In each of these images, the gardener or the sower, represents God.

It's God, the creator, who initiates the planting.

It's God who does the nurturing and who makes old things new.

The palm tree and the tall cedar; the faith of the early Christians; and the tiny mustard seed all symbolize the phenomenal potential for growth within us and through us.

These mighty metaphors tell us, that by responding to God's love and care, we are able to bear good fruit, much better than we can imagine.

If you've ever spread cedar chips or stored items in a cedar chest, you know that cedar has a distinct aroma.

Likewise, mustard has a unique and pungent taste that permeates and enhances the food that it seasons.

Using them as symbols of God's Kingdom, in which God reigns, and where we serve as ushers of that reign, then our faithful works too, should cause people to take notice and be effective.

Jesus was a living example of this parable.

He came from Nazareth, a town so small and insignificant that it didn't appear on any Jewish or Roman maps of that time in history.

Jesus was a nobody from No-wheres-ville. Nathaniel gave evidence to this when he asked, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?”

Well, as it turns out, the answer is, ”Yes!”

Jesus, Mr. Mustard Seed, gathered a few other Mr. Nobodies, like Nathaniel, some smelly fishermen, a zealot, a tax collector, a couple of Marys and a Martha; and with Jesus’ nurturing, they turned the world upside down.

They were sprigs that relied on God to become cedars.

They were seeds that were fed by Jesus’ insight of the scriptures and they grew into giant mustard shrubs.

Together they fed thousands. They gave sight to the blind, healed the sick, freed people from the demons that tortured them, opened the ears of the deaf, and gave voice to the mute. Guided by God’s own Holy Spirit, the church was born and grew. It spread around the world to places that those first disciples didn’t even know existed.

Often, we have no idea of how much, a random act of kindness, or a friendly word we share, will mean to someone else.

Even the smallest act of charity we extend, can transform another person's life.



Consider this example:

A parish youth group was packing clothing for the poor and homeless.

As kids will, they made a game of it.

Using their imaginations, they created weird costumes and merrily clowned around as they worked.

Then one of the kids felt a lump in the pocket of a sweater.

There he found a little bundle with a gold wedding ring inside.

On the paper wrapped around the ring was a note written in a shaky hand.

"I have no need of this now. I hope it will help you."

The mirth in the room was hushed.

The ring glowed as it was passed silently and reverently from one hand to another.

Then tenderly, the ring was carefully refolded inside the note

and was secured inside the pocket with strong safety pin.

The sweater was then packed off with the other clothes.

But for the students, the radiance of the ring remained.

The person who donated the sweater and ring, never knew the outcome of that gift.

The hearts of a number of teens were touched by that generous donation.

This might have led to a great number of other selfless actions by those teens, as they grew into adulthood.

Possibly the recipient of the ring was a person in need

who could sell the ring for cash in which to feed their family.

Maybe the ring would enable someone without the means to purchase a ring,

to finally "pop the question" with the person they love;

and begin a relationship what would blossom into a long and loving marriage.



Mustard seeds, cedar saplings, and tiny loving actions grow and bear good fruit.

Christ is asking us to embrace the example of the sower.

He's inviting us to plant our seeds of kindness and joy

wherever and whenever we can, in the certain knowledge that they will,

result in a harvest of miracles.

Author, Mark Batterson, once described this spiritual phenomenon this way.

"I think faith is the small mustard seed of opportunities every day.

Am I going to love this person? Am I going to share my faith?

Am I going to pray this little prayer?

It really is a daily thing where we seize little mustard seed opportunities and then see what God does. “



So, what are our own mustard seed opportunities?

What are the seeds we plant, that grow into something new and great, or possibly even life-changing; that have outcomes we could never ask for or even imagine?

To discover our mustard seed, I believe we each need to consider, “What makes my heart sing?”

(At this point I will pull a box filled with some items to show.)

I have a box of mustard seeds here, that I’ve seen spread out like strawberry plants, and branch out to blossom and create more and more strawberries; more good fruit.

Beth’s Prayer Quilt: To start with, this quilt was made by people who’ve learned that they have a gift for sewing, a gift from God they can utilize to do God’s work. This quilt was sewn with love, knots were tied with prayers of hope, and the gift was passed on with generosity, and a with a sacred blessing.

It became a source of comfort and healing.

When hospital staff remarked how lovely the quilt was, a door was opened for Beth and me to evangelize in a comfortable and natural way.

We explained the meaning and significance of the colorful quilt.

The day it was accidentally tossed in the laundry with other bedding, hospital personnel from the bone marrow transplant floor to the hospital laundry, all became aware of the precious prayer quilt.

There was a great celebration by all, when it was successfully found and returned. This mustard seed became the stimulus for much conversation and inspiration.

A Pillowcase Dress: Originally called *Little Dresses for African Girls*, we now call them *Dresses Beyond Borders* because these carefully crafted dresses are sent to countries in Africa, and to Latin American countries.

New cedar branches!

We've seen photos of **some** of the girls who've received them, but we can only imagine how many girls have been protected from the **natural** elements or whose lives have been saved from **human** predators who prey on children who appear to have no one who cares for them and no one who watches over them.

A Greeting Card: Every month one of our members sends out birthday greetings and anniversary cards to people, so we can all know that we are cherished; that the world was blessed the day we were born; and that a loving marriage is an outward sign of not only two people's love for each other, but of God's love for us.

Some of our parish members have experienced what we call *a shower of cards*.

A mustard seed thought tugs at one person's heart; someone is struggling with a long-term illness or challenge in their life.

That idea turns into an email chain or a phone fan out; and before we know it, get well cards, notes of encouragement, inspiring text messages, Facebook postings, humorous comic emails, and caring phone calls, start arriving like a steady flow of raindrops, to let our struggling friend know that they are not alone, nor are they forgotten.

A Tupperware Container: Others of us have a gift for cooking and hearts for sharing. Often folks who, because of poor health or circumstances, don't have the strength or time to prepare food for themselves. They'll get word, that in the church refrigerator, there's a container of soup, a casserole, pancakes, or oatmeal that can be simply heated up for a quick and easy meal.

Reserved For Choir Sign: This item represents two kinds of mustard seeds. One is the seed of music. It enhances our worship and conveys God's word to our ears, our minds, and touches our souls. It also represents another kind of creative handiwork; the kind that made these signs. It's the silent and invisible work that is done by those who responded to the spring cleaning sign-up sheet, and the unseen maintenance and upkeep work that's done all year long when no one else is here.

A Can of Food: Not all of us are seamstresses, creative cooks, musicians, or handy fixer-uppers. But many of us have learned, that by simply contributing a can of food, when combined with others who donate toothpaste, cleaning supplies, paper products, or household items; we've been able to help countless people in need, through the *Open Hands Food Pantry*. We even were able to help a refugee family get settled in what was once an empty house, and is now a warm home with caring and supportive neighbors.



There are also things I don't have tangible symbols for:
the example that a parent or grandparent sets for the children in their care,
the respect people express toward their fellow employees,
the time donated to endeavors such as Rainbow Girls or the Lions Club,
random acts of kindness in a grocery store or while driving,
or visiting someone who is in the hospital.

There is a flourishing forest of ministry trees and service seeds,
planted and growing inside and outside of the walls of this tiny church.
This arbor of opportunity can be seen when we are tending to
the needs of countless persons, because we've opened our hearts to God.
We've discovered that we've been blest with gifts to share.
So we say, "Yes," to God's call to take action and to use our own
individual styles of ministry and service.
Let's all consider, how can we say to the world,
"I've got a mustard seed and I'm not afraid to use it."

Sources:

The New Interpreters Study Bible, NRSV with Apocrypha, Abington Press, Nashville, 2003

The Ring in a Sweater Pocket, Phoebe Ann Lewis, Catholic Digest.

Connections, June 2018, MediaWorks, Londonderry, N.H.

Mustard Seed Quote, Mark Batterson

I've got a mustard seed ..., a quote credited to various sources