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St. Thomas Church  
Pent. 7A; 7.25.20  
Gen. 29:15-28; Rom. 8:26-  
39; Matt. 13:31-33, 44-52

## **The Mustard Seed Conspiracy**

This morning's Gospel reading from Matthew gives us a series of snapshots of what the Kingdom of Heaven might look like from different points of view. Like the mesmerizing experience of gazing into a well-cut diamond, the writer of Matthew is unable to capture all the beauty, dimensionality and rich meanings in a single brush stroke.

Notice the pairing of these parables. The parables of the Mustard Seed and Yeast both contrast small, almost imperceptible beginnings with their great impacts in the end, revealing the power of God's movement in human lives.

The parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl have to do with discovering things of great value which ignite spiritual commitments that inspire sacrifices for the welfare of others and our communities.

The parables of the Net and the Weeds (from last week's Gospel reading) highlight the negative consequences of exercising our free will in a way that harm God's creation and undermine the principles of justice and peace that characterize God's kingdom.

There's also some scary stuff mixed in here about "weeping and gnashing of teeth." It is important to note that God's angels have the job of deciding how to direct the travel of human souls in the afterlife and not us!

All of these parables are important and speak to us in different ways depending on where we are in our own spiritual journeys. This morning I would like to propose that we take a closer look the parable of the Mustard Seed as it has a special relevancy. So many of us find that we are struggling to hold on to hope in face of so many things that are

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loosening our grip on our conviction that we can make a difference in this increasingly troubled world in which we live.

First, a world about mustard seeds. They are found all over the world and as we well know, many varieties pack a lot of punch in terms of flavor--not too bad, considering an average grain of mustard is only 1-3 millimeters in size. We are reminded to never underestimate the power of things that begin small and of little consequence.

Additionally, the mustard seed has captured the spiritual imagination of many of the world religions in addition to Christianity. For example, in Jewish cosmology the knowable universe is likened to a tiny mustard seed to demonstrate the relative insignificance of human knowledge compared with what God knows and comprehends.

In Buddhism, there is told the story of a grieving mother and the mustard seed. When a mother loses her only son, she takes her son's body to the Buddha to find a cure for her grief. The Buddha instructs her to bring to him a handful of mustard seeds but only from families that have never known the pain of sorrow and loss. The grieving mother goes from village to village unable to collect even one seed and soon discovers a cure for her grief that she didn't expect: the realization that she doesn't need to carry her pain alone. This is a particularly important truth during this pandemic when so many of us have felt unable to find enough companionship and fellowship in the midst of so many kinds of losses.

Nothing warms my heart more—and I know Father Lex would agree with me—than to discover when making a pastoral call that a parishioner has already beaten me to it. You all know who you are—thank you for being a part of the mustard seed conspiracy where the little, thoughtful things for others (a phone call, text, or card) add up being a big thing for those who are feeling alone, in pain, or disconnected.

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Those first disciples and followers of Jesus would have been very surprised to hear that the Kingdom of God—a KINGDOM— was to be compared to a mustard seed. How could something barely visible could be counted, in the end, as so vitally important to Jesus' mission. I believe this was intentional on Jesus' part. His whole life revealed how the small and insignificant becomes a vessel from which God's power can flow: a baby in a manger, a little nation called Israel, a humble carpenter from Nazareth, the selection of a handful of not-very-promising disciples, a criminal dying on a Cross in the back waters of the mighty Roman Empire.

First century Christians in Rome, to which the Apostle Paul was addressing in today's epistle, were also struggling to see how the fledging house churches run by severely persecuted Christians would one day survive and even thrive. Living in the shadows of mammoth statues of Roman emperors, Christians huddled in small make-shift house churches. Far from the palaces and villas, these early believers prayed for the spirit of Jesus to enter into their weakness and vulnerability and intercede for them with "sighs too deep for words." And through this sighing, and the lifting up of small seeds of faith they came to see that God's promises were good and much greater than what might be expected due to their present circumstances—that God's ultimate purposes prevail and our eternal.

The apostle Paul was inspired by the small mustard seeds of faith that he witnessed from the early Christians in Rome that lead him to say, with confidence, to his congregation in hiding, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, or depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

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While clearly not as dramatic as ancient Rome (at least not yet), we, too, have come to expect to find God in the grand and grandiose in our celebrity making and worshiping culture. We have our own equivalents to the statues of ancient Rome and some of them are coming down as I speak. Sometimes megalomania creeps into Church life as well as we are tempted to use cultural metrics for measuring success that obscures Jesus' way of humble love.

Jesus' parable often throws us off balance and its intentional. Who would have guessed that after laboring for so long to renovate our beautiful worship space that we would find ourselves unable to gather in it? Irony of ironies, right? But Jesus' mustard seed conspiracy is alive and well as we continue to reimagine what it means to be St. Thomas Church in these extraordinary times. During this pandemic when we "can't think and do big" in the usual way, I invite you to plant mustard seeds of faith wherever you happen to find yourself—however confined and constricted you might be.

A good friend of mine, Jim, newly ordained as a deacon in the Presbyterian Church has found himself unable to exercise his calling as he originally imagined and was trained for but finds himself in his home caring for his rapidly aging father and emotionally challenged siblings after putting in a hard day's work in the virtual office. It has been extremely hard for Jim to accept how this stressful, unglamorous and largely invisible role at home is now his church and he is a deacon and humble servant to his hurting family.

Perhaps some of you as well are struggling to find meaning, purpose, and strength in the new mission field you find yourself in day after day, doing many of the same demanding, sometimes impossible tasks, with decreasing hope that things will change any time soon. If you find yourself in this space, I invite you join me in offering up your faith to God—even if it feels tiny and insignificant like a mustard seed. In the

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wise words of Mother Teresa: “All God requires of us is to do small things with great love.” And then, the mustard seeds of faith will start sprouting in our lives—all we then need to do is watch for them.

Remember the mustard seed you plant could one day become a tree that provides a nest (a home) for one of God’s beloved.

I have good news to report: my friend, deacon Jim, sent me a recent photo of a courageous fledging Robin flying for the first time after struggling to leave the nest for weeks—all viewed outside his bedroom window. He said, he witnessed transcendence, courage, and spiritual flight for the first time in a very long time.

May all of us, like Jim, keep looking for the smallest of reminders that God is very much alive in the smallest of things. May all of us join Jesus’ mustard seed conspiracy and sing along with the psalmist, “Happy are those who make their home in God.” Amen.