

Sunday - June 14, 2009
Pastor - Rev. Paula P. Werner
Sermon - **A Symbol of Faith**

“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be formed by your grace, for you are our Lord, our rock and our redeemer Amen.”

Read Mark 4:30-32

You and I are not familiar with a mustard seed as Jesus' audience would have been – for mustard grew commonly in that area. It grows along the California coast, but we're here in Virginia and most of us have never seen a mustard plant or seed. The mustard seed is quite small. There's one in your bulletin – brought back by me from my trip to Israel—seeds grown overlooking the Sea of Galilee; the small letter “i” of the sermon title is dotted with a seed. I hope yours has not fallen off --- Becky Hubbard worked with me tediously affixing a single mustard seed, just so you'd get an idea of the incredible small size that Jesus was comparing the kingdom of God to.

This mustard seed parable is told in two other gospels – in Luke the seed becomes a tree, in Matthew's gospel it says the seed grows into the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree. In our Mark lesson, he says it grows into a shrub. Whatever image you have – a shrub or tree-- it's evident that Jesus wants to picture the kingdom in an ordinary manner for his listeners.

You see, when his followers heard the word kingdom, they thought that Jesus was bringing about a change in the government and social structure. No longer would they be dominated. They could rule and rid themselves of horrid Roman rule. That was not the kind of kingdom Jesus was talking about.

Jesus said the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed --- small with tremendous potential, which grows large and gives nesting place to the birds. Just as the mustard seed grow, so also does the kingdom grow and embraces others.

Jesus often spoke of the importance of little things -- not the grandiose of palaces and wealth, but of giving a cup of water to one who is thirsty, or using the one talent we're given. Jesus gave the example of the widow who gave her mite—her penny; Jesus told about kindness done unto "one of these least," and he spoke of the single mustard seed. Did you know that it takes 725—760 mustard seeds to weigh 1 gram and 28 grams to make an ounce. That means it takes more than 21,000 mustard seeds to weigh 1 ounce. Jesus used a seemingly insignificant mustard seed to describe the Kingdom of God.

Perhaps, though, we should re-examine that idea “insignificant”. Many of us think we are insignificant like that mustard seed, that what we do does not make a difference. I have a story that puts that thought to rest. The story took place in a small French village in the countryside where they gathered every year for their harvest festival, a week of celebration and thanks. Each family brought their own food for the celebration and also brought a bottle of wine they had made and poured it into the community barrel. At the climax of the celebration each year, the mayor opened the barrel and began the round of toasts. When he opened the spigot this year and tasted the first sip, he discovered what should have been wine was pure water! How did that happen? Well, each family had brought water in their bottle and saved their own wine at home. Each was sure that, in so large a barrel of wine, a little water would never be noticed, that their part would not make a difference. This story teaches us that each of us is significant – and what we do is significant – and who we are is significant. Each of us DOES make a difference. I like the quote “I am not everyone, but I am someone. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. What I can do, I ought to do. What I ought to do, I will do, by the grace of God.”

Yes, we do make a difference. We do with the words we say. This morning, the words, “I do and I will” were said in the baptismal ritual to signify starting a new life in Christ. These words were significant, momentous words. When you respond to a request for help here at church, with “yes, I’ll help with Fredcamp or Red Bird or Thurman Brisben”, your “yes” word makes the difference in whether some ministries here at church are started or continued.

You make a difference with your actions-- you give momentary insight into the kingdom of God when you send a card expressing your love and concern for someone ill or who is house-bound, or take a casserole to feed or offer a ride to the doctors. You show the importance of just one person when you do something whether or not there is a committee to work with or a group who will follow along. You may consider your actions or words insignificant, but they accomplish such important needs for others. Never underestimate the impact of your example on another. Who knows how many people have been brought to faith in Christ because of the tiny seed of faith that took root in the heart of someone else because of you. Who know what life was turned to God because of your words, your actions. Nothing that we do in God's name is too small to be used in his kingdom.

Because of several of you who gave of your time and organizational planning, your sense of fun and your spirit, your love of God and service to others, you touched youthful lives in years past in this church. St. Matthias member Adam Bray, son of Cathy and Sonny

Bray, and Brian Plum, son of Kathy Hawkins, are two young men whose full time vocations are in service to God – through social justice ministries. They are giving their lives in this work in no small part because of the impact of you who witnessed with your lives and led the youth group in years past and led them to kingdom of God living. That same kingdom building took place last weekend too, when 24 youth went on a retreat with 6 adult leaders. I know they had a great time and I also know that some seeds of faith were planted.

Everyone can be part of helping the kingdom to grow. Some folks shy away saying --- “oh, no, not me.... I don’t know enough, or I’m not spiritual enough. I’m just beginning my faith journey, or I have too many family responsibilities.” But remember God uses what we bring --- and it can be just a minute bit of faith and willingness, and God will help it grow. Jesus used the example of a mustard seed in two other ways when he spoke of faith..... in one instance in the Gospel of Matthew, he said, “...16:20 if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.” And in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus said, “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, “Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”

Jesus is painting a picture of the power of the smallest amount of faith. He is giving a vote of confidence, lifting up and motivating his followers—telling them that they do not have to know everything, or have it all together. They do not and you and I do not have to be Mother Teresa, or St. Matthias, you and I with this teeny bit of faith, we CAN do great things because we align ourselves with God’s will and way. You see, what we’re doing is getting our egos and self-centeredness out of the picture, and giving ourselves over to be vehicles for God’s work. GREAT things can be done.

Our mustard seed is our visual this morning. and it’s almost impossible to see. But this sack of sweet potatoes is another visual to help us understand the kingdom of God. These potatoes were bagged yesterday by a nearby church as part of the gleaning and feeding project of Society of St. Andrew. The story of the Society of St. Andrew is a mustard seed and kingdom of God story. It began 30 years ago, in 1979, HERE in Virginia. The Ken Horne family and the Ray Buchanan families (with 5 children between them) began praying daily for God’s guidance in beginning a shared ministry. Out of their prayer came a plan to live in an intentional Christian community dedicated to helping resolve the problem of world hunger. In 1979 Rev. Ken Horne and Rev. Ray Buchanan asked OUR Virginia Annual Conference to not be assigned to a local church but to be assigned to

a special appointment – to establish the Society of St. Andrew in Big Island, Va. With their wives and 5 children, they lived as the first Christians did in our New Testament --- living in a farmhouse and sharing a simple lifestyle that rejected consumerism. They grew their own vegetables and raised sheep, chickens, and rabbits and led workshops on hunger issues. Out of those workshops, a farmer, George Wooten, donated a tractor-trailer load of sweet potatoes to the Society of St. Andrew which they passed along to the Central Va. Food Bank in Richmond. And so the gleaning and feeding began.

It started out with prayer, and just a mustard seed amount of faith..... today, 30 years later..... let me tell you about this nationwide group that is simply extraordinary ---- a group that spends only 2% on administration and 5% on fund raising ----- that's an unheard of small amount. Society of St. Andrew from 2 families in 1979 has saved and given away in 30 years ---- 567 million 322 thousand, 439 pound of fresh food. Total servings of food equal 1 billion, 701 million 967 thousand, 317 servings. Using 31,712 volunteers from across this nation.

Jesus said, the mustard seed 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." This leaves me with hope, doesn't it you? We live in a time of huge problems and challenges. Many here are struggling with all sorts of personal and relationship issues – some are struggling with children or grandchildren whose lives seem to not follow a path we think will lead toward the best possible end. We fret and worry. I believe this parable teaches us that God can use even the tiniest bit of faith to grow the kingdom. You and I do not have to have all the answers, but we do need to be open to God's word, to speak it and live it. God will do the rest

Yes, this parable offers us hope. This parable tells us that there is no room for despair. God has a plan for each of us – a plan for growth. Let's commit to mustard-seed living.