

Third Sunday after the Pentecost
June 13, 2021
Southampton, MA

Scripture: Mark 4: 26-32

The parable of the mustard seed puts me to mind of a certain VW Bug. My father had a black Beetle in the garage in the early 1960's, and it was our favored form of all-family transportation. Now, having a Bug was not unusual. It was a popular vehicle, the price and gas mileage were great values, and having one made you part of a larger entity. That is to say, people driving other Beetles would wave and beep in friendly acknowledgement as they pattered along. All to the good, with one minor caveat: we were a family of *seven*. With Dad driving, and the three older girls scrunched in the back seat, I sat on Mother's lap on the front passenger side, and little brother was stowed in the rear grocery compartment, all of us blissfully ignorant of concept of seatbelts, which would not become available as standard equipment until 1964.

The Sunday morning trip to church was a regular item on our family agenda. On the trek to Westfield, Dad would entertain us with stories of Sunday School in Texas in the 1920's and 30's, and teach us hymns that he remembered from those years. With great cheer, and even more volume, I joined with the family singing "In the Garden", and "Love Lifteth Me": "I was sinking deep in sin, far from the peaceful shore. Very deeply stained within, sinking to rise no more." I tell you, nothing like singing of death and sin to start a five year old's Sunday morning off with a bang. We pulled into the parking lot and burst from the vehicle like Brood X cicadas. I would love to have been a fly on the wall to see the expressions of bystanders as we tumbled out of our packed in like clowns at the circus and emerged as our large and bustling post WWII family. A mustard seed on steroids. But we would have been too involved with extricating ourselves and straightening skirts and Sunday bonnets to notice the amusement of people around us. Out we went, to join the larger congregation gathering in the church, a safe and familiar place where we flew like birds, each seeking our own place in its branches.

The mustard seed parable reminds us that we should not take these stories – for teaching stories is just what parables are – too literally. Really, a mustard seed is not all that tiny, and the bush that grows from them is not all that big, in the scheme of things. Instead, the image is one of humility, possibility, perseverance and even charity. The seed is the beginnings of the church,

planted by Jesus in the most unprepossessing circumstances. It was planted in the rough and rocky soils of a small country subject to much more powerful nations in the region. Yet the seed, like the church, managed to take hold in the rough dirt and to grow to the point of being able to provide shelter to the birds. It can take a while for circumstances to be right for a seed to germinate and the plant to grow. It must wait for moisture to call it out of its hard shell, for the sun to provide warmth and time the roots to spread. Much of the work of growth happens in the dark, underground, before the plant emerges or the church can thrive.

I think about that liminal stage between seed and emergence rather a lot. Of all that is happening in preparation and gathering strength before the absolute wonder of a plant first poking its head out from the soil, testing the air before stretching to the sunlight. Waiting for the rain. Waiting for the warmth. Taking a chance that the tender shoot will not be stepped on and crushed before it can thrive. The miracle of each of those pieces coming together in just the right way and at just the right time for the cycle of growth to repeat itself, once again. All that is happening in the “meanwhile” time that we cannot even see.

“Meanwhile”. Have you ever run into a “meanwhile recipe”? The kind of recipe that you might make for a houseful of friends and family descending for a gathering? They are coming soon. Real soon. As in, they are coming down the road NOW. The main dish recipe looked great in the magazine or online and you glanced at it quickly before making the shopping list. All of the ingredients have been purchased and carefully laid out on the counter. You are ready to go. You’ve got this! Then you take another look at the recipe, just because. And that is when you discover that, in fact, you have chosen a “meanwhile” recipe. “Meanwhile” soak in marinade for 4 hours. Or, “meanwhile” have the frosting for the cake come to a seven minute boil, stirring constantly. Or “meanwhile” chill the filling for the rollup until set. Not for a few minutes. More like three hours. “Meanwhile” puree the vegetables and bake in individual mini casseroles, and don’t forget to decorate with fresh herbs and dribble with a wine reduction sauce. Which you have made “meanwhile”.

I don’t think that Jesus worried about dealing with a “meanwhile” recipe for the mustard seed. He planted the seeds of Christianity in his followers. He watered those seeds with his healing touches. He introduced the bright sunlight of understanding through his parables. And he

fertilized them with his blood. The “meanwhile” took care of itself. Slowly. With many new seeds and many new plantings.

Critical interpretations of the Bible that I have read consistently explain that the parable of the mustard seed is an allegory for the growth of the church, a pretty straightforward approach to tell us that the teachings of Jesus will grow even in the roughest of situations. And, of course, that is true. But on a more visceral level, is it not a beacon of hope, a promise of possibility for each of us? In the context of the larger church, yes, but also as very personal lifeline, offering a vision of potential, of expectation and of optimism. This past year and a half was a real challenge. The soil that we were tilling in our souls seemed, at times, too arid to sow seeds, too rocky to promote growth. And yet here we are, vaccinated, safe, resting in the branches of a mustard bush that was growing – meanwhile. Of course, now our challenge is to help provide that same opportunity to others. America’s pledge to provide 500 million doses of vaccine is a good start.

The hymn “Love Lifteth Me” that I mentioned early on begins in sin, hopelessness and darkness. “I was sinking, deep in sin, far from the peaceful shore. Very deeply stained within, sinking to rise no more.” But it continues with hope. “Then the master of the sea heard my despairing cry. From the waters lifted me. Now safe am I. Love lifted me. Love lifted me. When nothing else could help, love lifted me.” AHA! The secret ingredient, the special sauce that pushes the seed out of the soil and into the sun. It’s love. Beyond the soil, beyond the rain, beyond the sun, the seed of hope that is the church, that is us, needs it to thrive. But **meanwhile**, we must be sure to give each seed plenty of water and be ever so careful not to step on the tender shoots. Amen

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