

Miracle Grow Faith

Matthew 13:31-33

July 16, 2017

Six years ago, as I was just beginning my tenure as a district superintendent, I met regularly with the district Committee on Superintendency, which is the equivalent of our Staff Parish Relations Committee. Like our SPRC, the Com. On Superintendency's purpose was to give support, guidance, and feedback that the superintendent might perform ministry responsibilities well.

One member of that Committee was particularly soft-spoken, gentle in demeanor, and wise in his counsel. Rev. Bruce Chapman, at that time in his mid-80's, had served as a pastor in both rural and urban parishes, and had served as the Mohawk District superintendent when I was in college. I learned to listen very carefully to what Bruce had to say, for at each meeting he would make just one comment, which would always contain a nugget of wisdom that, if followed, would significantly enhance my ministry, my time management, or the development of healthy relationships. I learned to grasp onto each of Bruce's offerings as if he was giving pure gold. For following his guidance helped my ministry to grow, blossom, and flourish, even in challenging circumstances.

Today, we hear that God's love is like a mustard seed, one of the smallest of all seeds, that grows very rapidly. In fact, some varieties of mustard grow far beyond the knee-high plants we often see in fields of mustard along the mid-western highways. Some kinds of mustard grow into bushes or trees, sturdy enough to support resting birds.

At first glance, one may hear this parable and read a number of metaphors into it, such as how love or faith can begin small and with nourishment can grow and grow – and all that is good. But I think we need to take a second and deeper look into this parable. You see, the crowd listening to the story knows all too well that **mustard is an invasive weed!** It is the last thing anyone wants in their field if they are trying to grow something else. A grain or vegetable farmer would not only want to get rid of such a plant, but also rid themselves of the pesky birds that are hiding in the bushes and eating all of their good seed.

In Jesus day (before the community needed the condiment mustard to put on their hotdogs!), no one in their right mind would ever sow mustard seeds. Well,...no one that is, unless you are God! Remember, in these parables Jesus is describing God's love – and like the sower who casts the mustard seeds that are rejected by most, this parable reminds us that **God's love encompasses all** and reaches especially those that are rejected ... those who are on the fringes ... those who are broken. God's love is big enough for all of us, and fills us with grace, forgiveness, un-merited love.

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Jim Wallis writes that as he reads these verses about God's love / God's reign / God's kingdom, he is drawn to the vivid image of a beautiful tree. He says, "It is a tree of justice, sturdy and strong, standing by the banks of a flowing river. The poor are resting in its branches, and it is large enough for everyone – black, brown, red, yellow, white," all ages, all abilities, all gender identities, natives and refugees, the wanderers and the establishment, the rejected and the respected – all will be supported in its branches.

He goes on to state that he longs for the kingdom of God on earth to reflect that image. But Jesus says the kingdom is like a seed—the smallest of seeds – that will someday grow into that great tree of justice. Even the smallest of seeds of faith and love can grow to produce amazing results.

Another gospel writer, Luke, records Jesus teaching and using the metaphor of a mustard seed in yet another way. In Luke 17:5-6 we hear, *The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" And the Lord said, "If you had faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."* Sometimes our own faith seems oh so small. And yet, God can do SO MUCH with even a small seed, a nugget of wisdom, a grain of faith, a morsel of nourishment!

On a recent trip to a conference in Mexico, Joyce Hollyday heard the amazing account from those who founded the "Service of Peace and Justice" there. Their inspiration came from Brazil, where a group of peasants had lived and farmed on a small piece of land. Brazil's government and a private business venture wanted that piece of land in order to develop a new business. So, they convinced the Congress to give them the right to legally seize the land. The peasants were pushed away, their homes and crops bulldozed out of sight.

As the peasants moved on to start over, this action was repeated several times. Whenever the peasants tried to resist, the police came in with force, wounding and killing some of them. Their burden of suffering was tremendous.

So when it became known that they were about to be pushed off their land yet again, one person asked, "Why should we resist? It will just mean that more of us will lose our lives." Another pointed out that even if they were not killed, they would die slowly of starvation. Without land, they had no way to live, no way to plant or grow food. Despair was the prevailing mood, until some of the women got an idea. With a little research, the women found out where all the members of the Congress lived. While the government officials were at work in their offices, the women went with their children – each to a different house – and sat on the front lawns of the luxurious homes.

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These were some of Brazil's most prestigious neighborhoods, and the sight of ragged women and their children on the lawns was an extraordinary and curious vision. After a while some of the wives of the Congress members went out with bread. The mothers told them, "We want no bread from you."

Some of the wealthy women came out with money. "We have not come here for money," said the mothers. And eventually each wife asked, "What do you want?"

The peasant women answered, "We are going to die. And since this is a nice place, we thought we would like to die here." The wives asked, "Why are you going to die?" And the mothers told of how their land was about to be stolen again, how their children were going to starve, and how the Congress was voting to make their doom legal.

The phones at the Congress began buzzing. Every wife called her husband to plead with him not to vote for the bill in Congress. And in the end, the people kept their land and their future.

Injustice seems so entrenched...like the roots of the mulberry tree. And yet, even the faith of the most vulnerable, most powerless, seemingly insignificant ones can uproot the deep roots of exploitation, greed, and violence, and support the growth of provision and care. Jesus reminds us to think bit, even if our faith is small. A small amount of faith, when shared, can multiply to make an amazing difference for the cause of God's love in the world, even today.

The gift of faith is pure gold to those searching for love, respect, value and purpose. With whom will you share a seed of faith today? What will the miracle of God's love produce for us today?