

The Marvelous Mystical Mustard Seed

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

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Texts: Romans 8, Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Romans 8:26-39 (adapted; minus a few verses) The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. We don't really know how to pray as we should, and so the Spirit prays within us with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit prays for the saints according to the will of God. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, for those who are called according to God's purpose. If God is for us, who can be against us? If God did not withhold even the Son, but gave him up for all of us, we can be sure that God will also give us everything else we need. Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who clears our name, so who can condemn us? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who sits at the right hand of God, who surely prays for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 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, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 After the parable of the weeds and the wheat, Jesus put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

And Jesus told them still more parables: "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

Keep these words in your heart. The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. Thanks be to God.

Early summer mornings, before I'm even fully awake, my bare feet wander outside into my little garden to see what's blooming, what needs picking, what needs pulling, what's just there for my

pure viewing pleasure. Almost as often, my thoughts wander back to my father, CJ, the rhubarb king of Cambridge. Out of his massive rhubarb patch, he gave away hundreds more rhubarb plants. At the age of 80, he started a community garden for residents at his senior living facility. He tilled up about an acre, wangled a water line from management, and took a busload of seniors to the Green Barn nursery where they had great fun picking out their favorite garden vegetables. Then it was, “Oh, CJ, would you plant these for me? Oh, CJ, would you water my plot? Oh, CJ, would you pick my tomatoes?” He would do it, too. He just loved gardening. One of my favorite stories about him, which you’ve probably heard before, goes like this:

Me: CJ, why do you like gardening so much?

CJ: (Pause...) Plant a beet seed, you’ll never get a carrot. That’s God’s faithfulness.

CJ was a Calvinist, through and through. If you can trust anything in this world, you can trust God’s Providence (with a capital P), and the proof of Providence is in the seed. The life that lies buried in the heart of the seed is a little spark of God carried over from creation. I think of this when I read those amazing stories of seeds frozen for 32,000 years in Siberian soil, brought back to life in 21st century labs. And the miraculous part is, after 32,000 years, they are still fertile. They can propagate. The proof of God is in the seed, the marvelous mystical mustard seed.

Mustard, of course, grows wild in the land where Jesus walked. Whether it was, in fact, the smallest seed, is less important than the tremendous benefits the obliging plant provided, and not just shelter for the birds. Eat the greens and spice your food with the seeds, use the whole thing as medicine. I once caught a dreadful cold in Paris that settled in my lungs. We went to the local pharmacist and he sold us a mustard plaster - ever try one of those? It heated up to about 180 degrees on contact, left my skin hot and red, but my lungs clear. Marvelous mustard! Mystical seed. Mystical, because seeds have direct communion with God. The spark of God is alive in them. The seed is not God, but still is somehow one with God. The seed is like the dream of God. Because what else is the kingdom of God than God’s dream for the world, faithfully waiting in the seed, ready to break open and grow as beet, or carrot, or mustard bush, or long-extinct tree? And make flowers, and fruit, to produce seed to grow again?

What kind of excites me about all the parables we read today is that recurring image of the kingdom of God--the dream of God for the world. In each case, we see the dream already hidden in the seed, in the flour, in the soil, in the field, in the market, in the sea. And the dream is a dream of flourishing, of growth and beauty and abundance beyond human reckoning. It’s a dream of fantastic diversity, a dream of inclusion, where lowly mustard seeds roll in the hand along with diamonds and pearls. Treasure is hidden everywhere, waiting to be found and cherished and brought to light and life, used for God’s purpose. When Paul writes in Romans 8, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, for those who are called according to God’s purpose,” he’s saying essentially the same thing. There is a purpose

for every seed, every plant; every grain of sand. The whole universe is seeded with God's dream, and brought to life by God's Providence.

We hear that verse a lot: "all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose." But it's part of a longer text that speaks of the shared suffering of all creation and ends with the soaring promise that nothing - "neither death, nor life, nor any powers in heaven or on earth can separate us from the love of God." When I visited my friend Don in the hospital, his life had mostly drained away. I asked him for his favorite Bible passage. Romans 8, he said. You know, we sometimes joke about Norwegian bachelor farmers, but few have actually met them. I have: Don was one. Well, not exactly a farmer, because his career was with the railroad, but he retired early to live alone in a cabin he'd built with his dad, surrounded by a forest of Norway pines they'd planted together. Big and humble, pale and shy, he was the one who stood up when church members were sniping at each other about whether to buy their first computer - a Commodore 64, circa 1985. Don silenced the argument by saying he himself would purchase it. He did, too. Who knew he even had two dimes to rub together? So when he asked for Romans 8, I turned to the end: "Nothing can separate us from the love of God..." He began instead, his eyes closed in prayer, with verse 1: "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ." His big strong body was shrunken, sagging like a building slated for demolition: destined for nothing better than the grave, you might think. Don knew better. He reached down inside himself to the seed planted there - who knows when? At his baptism? His confirmation? During long nights alone with the trees and the stars? And he claimed that seed as God's dream in him: There *is* no condemnation. If Christ is in you, even though the body dies, God's Spirit lives in you as seed coming to flower, to fruit, to seed again. All the world is seeded with God's dream. Even you. Even me.

One of my favorite Quaker writers is Isaac Penington, who spoke often of "the seed." He wrote in 1681: "Sink down to the seed which God sows in thy heart and let that be in thee, and grow in thee, and breathe in thee, and act in thee." He knew so well about the marvelous mystical seed that lives in you, that lies dormant, perhaps, for years or decades, until just the right conditions cause that spark of God to burst into life. One of the best photos of the past week was of 95-year-old Queen Elizabeth knighting 100-year-old Captain Thomas Moore. He's the one who pledged to make so many laps of his garden with his walker to raise £1000 for hospitals lacking supplies for treating coronavirus. He ended up raising £33M, or about \$41M. Who knows what brought that particular seed to life in him just then? Who ever knows when God's Spirit awakens in us? What we do know is that the seed is there in each of us, biding its time until the *right* time. These can be discouraging days: days when we recoil from the news, days when we feel we can hardly lift our hands to pray, when we hardly know how to pray, or what to pray for. Paul knew that feeling, too, 2000 years ago. He wrote, also in Romans 8: "We don't really know how to pray as we should, and so the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words." Providence outlasts our lifetimes. As Parker Palmer, a contemporary Quaker, put it, "If you measure your life's worth just by short-term outcomes, you'll never release your full potential to change the world. Measure

your life by your faithfulness to the labor.” If the seed you nurture is God’s seed in you, it will bear fruit.

And that’s God’s faithfulness, too. Amen. Thanks be to God.