

October 29, 2023; Reformation and Invitation Sunday
 Matthew 13:31-33; 2 Corinthians 9:6-8, 10-11; Psalm 46:1-3, 10-11

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SCRIPTURE:

Psalm 46:1-3, 10-11

¹ God is our refuge and strength,
 a very present^[a] help in trouble.
² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
 though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea,
³ though its waters roar and foam,
 though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

¹⁰ “Be still, and know that I am God!
 I am exalted among the nations;
 I am exalted in the earth.”
¹¹ The LORD of hosts is with us;
 the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Matthew 13:31-33

³¹ [Jesus] put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³² 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.”

2 Corinthians 9:6-8, 10-11 Me

⁶ . . . the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not regretfully or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to provide you with every blessing^[c] in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.

¹⁰ He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.

SERMON: “Mustard Seeds and Revolutionary Faith”

*Portions adapted from **Reformation Sunday Service**, conceived and written by Lisa Frenz Copyright 2003. All rights reserved.*

. . . Mustard Seed story on video . . .

*[Amy-Jill Levine and Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, **The Marvelous Mustard Seed**, (Louisville, KY: Flyaway Books, 2018)]*

The small becomes large. Mysteries unfold that we cannot initially perceive. The unexpected comes in ways we cannot miss, and God’s kingdom is growing in our midst. The mustard seed story helps us to imagine what can be, but isn’t...yet!

Jesus tends to use the ordinary things of life to make his points in his teachings. He uses the mustard seed as a metaphor in at least a couple different ways. In another teaching he speaks of the capacity of faith the size of a mustard seed. “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed you can move mountains.” But in this passage, the mustard seed represents something about the *kingdom of heaven*.

I'm fairly certain Jesus realized a mustard seed does not actually grow into the "greatest of shrubs" which then becomes a tree. You don't get a giant redwood from a mustard seed. At most, you might wind up with a plant 8-10 feet tall. But parables are not intended to be heard literally. They require imagination, and they frequently confound and surprise the listener.

In this part of the gospel, Jesus is offering several comparisons to describe the *kingdom of heaven* . . . It is like a farmer who sows seeds, a hidden treasure, a pearl bought at great price, a fishing net, like yeast that leavens a loaf of bread. These are all familiar objects.

The mustard seed and the yeast, in particular, suggest that Jesus is saying how great things can grow from a small start. And that may be part of the lesson, but with parables there's always more. Something more challenging – more provocative is happening here.

Jesus is talking about the *kingdom of God* or the *kingdom of heaven*. More recently, it has become more common to speak of the *kin-dom* of God, rather than *king-dom*. Kings and kingdoms are not so much a part of our contemporary setting, and theologically, *kin-dom* makes good sense. It emphasizes the relational nature of God's dream for the world – a way-of-being in which we are all kin to God, to one another, and the earth. We might also refer, at times, to the commonwealth of God or the beloved community.

However, as Jesus is talking with those gathered, there is a very intentional use of **kingdom** language. Consider the context of the original hearers of Jesus' teachings. In their world, *kingdom* was all around them and any talk of a kingdom would bring forth images of empire, emperors, power, wealth, armies, and bloody wars. If the people have heard that Jesus is the *king of the Jews* and he's talking about a **kingdom**, they probably had expectations that he would save them as a powerful king might – going to battle against the powers-that-be, quashing the oppressive empire with even greater power and bigger armies, stirring up a rebellion that would supplant Caesar. Other so-called messiahs had made such promises, so why wouldn't Jesus be the same?

Jesus' words related to *kingdom* may have produced a bit of mental whiplash! The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed?? Really?! Jesus' words are revolutionary. Can't you just hear the thoughts of Jesus' listeners? "What's that you're saying? Your vision upsets the status quo, changes the face of society, throws out the old way of doing things, strips away everything that is comfortable and reliable, everything that is us, who we are." [Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017] How can any kingdom be like a mustard seed, for goodness sake?

When you follow Jesus, you are following a revolutionary. He calls you "to follow him into a world where you've never been, into a world inhabited by strangers and outcasts—people who are un-homed, people experiencing mental illness, the prostitutes and pimps, the thieves, the dishonest, people who are immigrants, people of advance age, the people with AIDS, people who you think may be dangerous.

"Touch the untouchables, reach out for the impossible, welcome the unthinkable. All of this revolutionary way leads to changes in our thinking, changes in our lives, changes in society . . . Changes that reflect and build up the kin-dom of God." [adapted from Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017]

On this Reformation Sunday we recall the revolution started by Martin Luther in 1517. This is when, he nailed his 95 theses to the church door to express his growing concern with the corruption within the Church and the papacy. Though he initially only intended to attach *indulgences*, Luther's mustard seed planting resulted in a reforming of the church. I have a few things I'd like to see changed in churches, but I can't imagine my pounding them on our church door would have much impact. From Luther's protest, Protestantism bloomed. It was a remarkable time in history. Reformation is all about risk and changes,

about going where Jesus leads, not knowing where it will end, knowing only that Jesus requires that we reform our lives, our families, our society, our churches.

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. God's kingdom is not grandiose – no one person has higher status than any other. It is grounded (or planted) in simplicity of faith in God -- the One who deems to call all humans Children of God. That was the surprising thing about Jesus' metaphors for the kingdom of God. The kingdom is so improbable by the accepted standards, yet it grows in hearts and communities; it brings life and help and hope to all touched by it. The church, no matter what her size or level of resources, carries on the world-transforming mission of the commonwealth of God.

Amy-Jill Levine says, “Don't ask ‘when’ the kingdom comes or ‘where’ it is. The *when* is in its own good time -- as long as it takes for seed to sprout and dough to rise. The *where* is that it is already present in the world. It is present when humanity and nature work together, and we do what we were put here to do -- to go out on a limb to provide for others, to build relationships that are authentic and vulnerable, to act in compassion towards realities of violence, to create systems of justice that allow all of God's people to flourish, to set tables at which there is food for everyone and no one is turned away.” [Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 182]

Planting seeds is risky. We don't have control over everything that effects their growth. Will the rains fall? Will there be enough sun and warmth? Will the deer destroy the plants before they have a chance? We may be tempted to say, “What's the use?” But you never know when a seed you sowed might take root. What Sunday School lesson, what song, what expression of God's love might be deeply implanted and eventually bloom?

“That the kingdom of God starts small and grows large is just one part of what Jesus is trying to teach. It also requires the work of planting, specific seeds, mustard seeds, seeds of love and of justice. It requires creating and caring for space where all creatures can gather and be nourished, it requires a faith rooted in the mystery of God's love, and a wild imagination . . . Faith is about mystery and hope... Taking the risk to plant the seeds, not knowing what they'll produce, yet trusting that there is something amazing at work, beyond our imagination.” [Melissa St. Clair, *Heart of the Rockies Christian Church, Fort Collins, CO*]

Oscar Romero said, “We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.” [Excerpt from *“A Future Not Our Own,”* attributed to now Saint Oscar Romero]

The mustard seed reminds us to be ever-sowing more and more seeds into a worldly kingdom that is desperately in need of the Godly kin-dom transformation. In the goodie bags you received several weeks ago, there was a little vessel with a mustard seed in it. There were extras, so I made earrings and a necklace out of some of them. Long ago, when I was a child, my parents gave me a mustard seed necklace, and with it, the “faith like a mustard seed” verse. I now have the charm on a charm bracelet. It reminds me that an act or gift as small as a mustard seed can have an impact. It can grow into a part of the kin-dom of God; it can overcome the all too frequent sowing of hopelessness, hate, and fear in the world.

What is the kin-dom of God like?

It is like a pearl, so small, but of such great beauty that someone would give all she had for it.

It is like yeast that slowly, miraculously causes bread to rise, so it can feed a family.

It is like a teen activist who speaks to powerful leaders about the urgency of the climate crisis.

It is like a young person, who survived a school shooting and who continues to call for changes that will lead to greater safety for others.

It is like the seeds planted in our garden, which grow into vegetables that nourish hungry people.

It is like the hymn or song that stays in your heart and speaks to you when you most need its words.

It is like the person who tithes 10% of their income even while living on a small salary.

It is like a church capital campaign that seeds the growth of mission and ministry for years to come.

The kin-dom of God is like a church where all the people come together in giving of themselves and their resources to build a future – a place people can rest safely in her branches and the community can flourish.

“The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed

Growing from small to colossal

From impossible to see, to unable to miss

It's not what we expect and yet there it is

Surprising us

Helping us to imagine what can be

But isn't...yet!”

[Amy-Jill Levine and Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, The Marvelous Mustard Seed, (Louisville, KY: Flyaway Books, 2018)]

May you have great imaginations and live into the mustard-seed, revolutionary kin-dom of God with faithful and generous spirits. Amen.