

Time after Pentecost
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Ezekiel 17:22-24; Psalm 92:1-4, 12-15;
2 Corinthians 5:6-17; Mark 4:26-34

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The mustard plant is so common and the term “mustard seed” so overused, that we could easily pass over them as uninteresting and old hat. Granted, some people love mustard greens, and many of us love different kinds of mustard as a spice. But mustard, though a humble plant, is a fascinating paradox – it can be both good and bad.

For example, it can be a weed. I remember driving by huge wheat fields in northwestern Minnesota where my dad pointed out so many of these beautiful yellow flowering plants in amongst the wheat. Then he'd comment that those yellow plants, though rather nice to look at, were just mustard weeds. The weed aspect of mustard falls into the category, even with the ancient Hebrews, as an unclean plant described by the Jewish Rabbinic Law of Diverse Kinds. In other words, it is disorder, and not good, to mix different classes of plants; so one would not mix wheat and weeds.

But on the other hand, mustard is good, because it is a healing herb. Even the Greek doctor Hippocrates, way back in 400 B.C., wrote about its use for aches, pains and colds. And the Jewish Talmud calls it a general preventative medicine. Some of you may remember using mustard plaster for chest congestion (luckily I never did, but I hear it can be very hot). Mustard also comes in a lot of different varieties for seasoning and flavor. So, mustard is good, in its place, but in a field of grain, it is nothing but a weed. And I can only imagine that Jesus' listeners, many of whom were farmers, must have been a bit confused when He compared the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed.

Mustard is a tiny seed, only about .075 inches in diameter (or for the more mathematically or scientifically minded, 75 one-thousandth of an inch, or less than 2 millimeters) which is very tiny. Yet that seed grows into an herb, granted a very tall herb, that can be six to nine feet tall, especially the Middle East varieties. So wouldn't comparing the Kingdom of God to a great cedar tree make a lot more sense? The cedar tree, like the one Ezekiel described in today's lesson, grows tall and strong and valuable, and it gives protection with its shade and good strong branches for every kind of bird to nest. Yet, Ezekiel reminds us, God brings that tall tree low.

Now, when Jesus came to us on this earth, His was a very humble beginning as a baby born in a mere stable. His ministry had a humble beginning, with just twelve disciples (also of lower class origins), and He preached on hillsides to all kinds of people. Thus, a mustard seed does seem like an apt comparison to the Kingdom of God. God brings the low tree high, continues Ezekiel.

Mustard seeds, because of their small size, can be carried far and wide, and they take root and grow everywhere. So the Word of God is like a mustard seed. The Word of God spreads when

any one of Jesus' followers does the least thing to witness to Christ's love. Like the great growth of the tiny mustard seed, God's Word has spread throughout the world.

A retired pastor, who is a very good friend of mine, was stationed in the Air Force as a chaplain in Peshawar, Pakistan, one of the most dangerous cities in the world right now. There he spent time with a priest, Father VanEarp of the Catholic order of the White Fathers. Father VanEarp and several other priests and monks had a parish church, a school, and other help ministries there. The Christians of Peshawar, both Catholic and Protest, are mainly of Hindu (and not Muslim) origin, since it has been a crime punishable by death for Muslims to convert. That priest told my friend that in the twenty years he served there, he had not had a single convert. Had he felt discouraged and wondered if any mustard seed would ever take root? I don't know the answer to that question, but I do know he continued to aid the many people of all faiths who flocked to him for food, medicine, band-aids, clothing . . . anything he could provide to help them. Each deed he performed, even the smallest deed, even if it only touched one person, that deed was done in Christ, with Christ, and through Christ. Even the smallest deed is a true witness, the result of a new creation in Christ. How that little, tiny seed grows is documented on the cellular level by botanists, but what starts that life and brings it to fruition is a mystery and a miracle. The White Fathers may never know what seeds may sprout from all of those seeds they planted in Peshawar, but God's word is still there and is still active among those people.

See, we humans plant seeds. We may tend and water them. But the harvest is God's. We are not responsible for the outcome; that is the work of the Holy Spirit. Likewise, the sureness of the coming of the Kingdom of God is not from any human, but from God. As Paul wrote, we walk by faith and not by sight. All in Christ are new creations with new hearts and new outpouring of love for others. Only then do we have the ability to minister, year after year, even in the darkest of places. Just because we cannot completely understand how a seed grows into a large plant, we still do have faith that the seed we planted will grow. We have faith in "what we cannot see," as Paul says.

Now, if Father VanEarp only wanted converts fill his church, he would only be looking for what he could see. Now filling a church with converts would really be great, but where he was working (and perhaps where we may work) all of us need to trust in Christ that the Holy Spirit continues to be there, changing people. The priest needed to trust in Christ to walk by faith and not by sight, and so do we.

When Christ is in us, we, as a new creation, witness to others, knowing that the outcome is not ours, but God's. If Father VanEarp felt he was responsible for the outcome of his work, he would have despaired. Christ's love in him and through him and with him made it possible for him to persevere all of those years. When we depend upon ourselves, our egos get the best of us and we are headed for sure and certain failure.

This past Good Friday, I was going into Zion Lutheran Church for the noon service when I met a woman sitting in one of our many doorways. She was sobbing. I stopped to talk to her, and she told me the sad story of her life and her daughter's sad story, too, including the fact that that moment, she was drunk, and that both she and her daughter were addicted to alcohol. I could feel like she had the entire weight of the world on her shoulders and no hope for any future. All I had to offer her was a cup of coffee, a sympathetic ear, and my prayers. I felt helpless to be able

to do anything substantial for her. But then I needed to stop and remind myself that I can offer Christ's love and care for others; that I am not in control of the outcome. It is not about me or what I can do, it is only about Christ and what Christ can do. That is what the new creation in Christ is about: Christ's love and care flowing through us to others.

In Christ, Paul says, is a new creation, everything is new, and it is Christ's love that urges us on. Christ died for all people. We no longer live for ourselves but for others. Father VanEarp served everyone who came to him – Muslim, Hindu, Christian – all people. We too can witness, as he did, in many ways, by offering food, clothing, housing, to anyone in need; by caring for our cities, our fields, our water, our industries. We care for others by fulfilling their needs and preventing harm and pollution that cover their world and ours. God created this world, and God called it good, and we need to do no less. Let us care for the world and all the people in it with joy and with thanksgiving. Like that tiny mustard seed that grows into a huge bush, Christ's word in and through us can yield an amazing harvest.

As I was writing this sermon, the news reported the bombing of a major hotel in Peshawar, Pakistan. In Peshawar, there is a thriving group of Christians, both Catholic and Protestant. Let us keep those Christians in that very dangerous city in our prayers. Theirs is a very difficult situation, yet these Christians are aiding all people, regardless of their religion or ethnic background. They show love because they know that God first loved them. To repeat Paul's words, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation."

Amen.