

## ***“Solving Mysteries”***

Sermon for First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Decatur GA

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, June 17, 2012

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Listen for the Word of God spoken through the Holy Scriptures in Mark 4:  
26-34:

### ***The Parable of the Growing Seed***

*[Jesus] also said, ‘The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.’*

### ***The Parable of the Mustard Seed***

*He also said, ‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.’*

### ***The Use of Parables***

*With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.*

One year for Father's Day I was given a collection of Far Side cartoons.

One cartoon in particular stood out for its insightfulness.

The cartoon is labeled, "*Return of the World's Greatest Salesman*".

It shows a guy in a rowboat dodging icebergs

while several refrigerators perch precariously in the stern.

All along the Alaskan shore are happy Eskimos,

shouting and waving and calling out for the salesman to visit them first.

I've met salesmen like that,

people who could sell sand to a nomad and kudzu to a Georgian.

I've walked out of stores with something I could neither use nor afford

and yet was happy, thrilled, tickled -- for a while --

completely convinced that this particular purchase \

was going to save my life.

What had I really bought?

I had bought the confidence of the seller.

"Confidence is generally described as a state of being certain

either that a hypothesis or prediction is correct

or that a chosen course of action is the best or most effective.” (Wikipedia)

Thank goodness Jesus has confidence in the discipleship of his followers.

While we are far from perfect and often fall short of hopes and expectations,

the Spirit of God believes in our capacity and availability to do the right thing.

Ability is a plus;

but the first, and biggest step is to show up.

Christ’s confidence is seen in the word of encouragement he offers in this parable.

The kingdom of God is like when the least of all the seeds is sown

and grows to become greater than all the herbs.

Small beginnings are natural.

Just about everything worthwhile, no matter how great or fantastic or magnificent,

started out with a small beginning.

Everything must have a small beginning.

Nothing emerges full-grown.

Jesus said, *“How shall we find something with which to compare  
the Kingdom of God, or what picture will we use to represent  
it?”*

*It is like a grain of mustard seed, which,  
when it is sown upon the ground,  
is the least of all the seeds upon the earth.*

*But, when it is sown, it springs up and it becomes greater than all  
the herbs;*

*and it sends out great branches so that the birds of the  
heaven*

*can find a lodging under its shade.”*

Three observations about the parable which may already be obvious  
to you

(Interestingly enough, these points would have been  
immediately recognizable

to anyone who heard Jesus tell the parable):

**One, in Palestine a grain of mustard seed**

**stood proverbially as the smallest possible thing.**

For example, to say, “faith as a grain of mustard seed”

is to say, “the smallest conceivable amount of faith can move

mountains.”

And this same mustard seed does grow to become a large, leafy, bushy tree.

## **Two, in the Hebrew Scriptures**

**one of the most common ways to describe an empire  
is to use the analogy of a tree with wide  
branches,  
branches in which birds can nest  
and find shade, shelter,  
companionship, and food.**

You might consider that Jesus is saying

that the parable is about the empire of the church.

The church began with one individual, Jesus Christ,

then grew to include a dozen or so followers,

and has grown to touch every continent on the world.

With such a broad reach and scope, the church includes all kinds of opinions.

Not everyone thinks as you do! We must be tolerant of one another.

John Wesley wrote,

*“We think and we let think...”*

*I have no more right to object to a [person]*

*for holding a different opinion from mine  
than I have to differ with a [person]  
because he [or she] wears a wig and I wear my own  
hair.”*

**Our third observation is that the end  
as well as the beginning  
of the growth of the kingdom  
are both God’s doing and not our own.**

This parable about the kingdom of God is just that: the kingdom of God.

Jesus is reminding us that the growth of God’s reign

takes place apart from human effort and human understanding.

We are to be grateful recipients of God’s love and care;

we are to do all we can to be faithful and to share God’s love;

but it is God, not us, who is responsible for growth.

Admiral Richard Byrd was in the Antarctic in 1934

when he wrote the following in his diary:

*"I took my daily walk at 4 p.m. today in 89 degree frost.*

*I paused to listen to silence...*

*The day was dying, the night was being born, but with peace...*

*Here were imponderable processes and forces of the cosmos,  
harmonious and soundless. Harmony, that was it!*

*That was what came out of the silence --*

*a gentle rhythm, the strain of a perfect chord, the music of  
the spheres, perhaps.*

*In that instant I could feel no doubt [humanity's] oneness with the  
universe.*

*The conviction that came that that rhythm was too orderly, too  
harmonious,*

*too perfect to be a product of blind chance...*

*that, therefore, there must be purpose in the whole*

*and that humanity was part of the whole process*

*and not an accidental off-shoot.*

*It was a feeling that transcended reason;*

*that went to the heart of human despair and found it  
groundless.*

*The universe was a cosmos, not a chaos;*

*[humanity] was as rightly a part of that cosmos as were the  
day and  
night."*

*Uses of Solitude)*

(The

The parable of the Mustard Seed reminds us that the kingdom of God starts out small and grows incredibly large.

Even though the ending and the beginning are God's doing and not our own,

God has chosen to work through us.

God is responsible for life and for growth; our challenge is to believe in it.

Jesus has confidence in the discipleship of his flawed followers.

While we are far from perfect

and often fall short of hopes and expectations,

the Spirit of God does trust that we can and will do the right thing.

Christ's confidence is seen in the word of encouragement

he offers in this parable.

The kingdom of God is like when the least of all the seeds is sown

and grows to become greater than all the herbs.

Small beginnings are natural.

We think there is some great mystery to how to change the world.



This is one mystery we can solve.

Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.

Think about it.

Everything worthwhile, everything worth doing and being,

no matter how great or fantastic or magnificent,

started with a small beginning,

something as small as a seed, as an idea,

as a wink or a smile or a note on a piano

or a scribbled note on a napkin in a  
diner.

Everything must have a small beginning.

Nothing emerges full-grown.

So take heart!

Do not become discouraged

if and when you get frustrated

with the slow, sometimes glacial pace of change.

There is a scientific experiment to show the effect of dyes.

A large vessel of clear water is taken and a little phial of dye.

Drop by drop the dye is dropped into the clear water.

At first it seems to have no effect at all

and the water does not seem to be colored in the least.  
Then quite suddenly the water becomes tinged with color;  
bit by bit the color deepens;  
soon the whole container of water has changed.  
It is the repeated drops that produce the effect.

Have you ever wondered why make the effort at all?

Haven't I done all that I can do?

Is it worth starting anew, beginning again, to reach the hoped for destination?

Remember this -- everything must have a small beginning.

Nothing emerges full-grown.

Accept the reality and the grace found in small beginnings.

Trust in a Creator who understands and appreciates what it takes

to start a species with a handful of clay and a breath of fresh air.

The Roman scholar Cato

started to study Greek when he was over 80 years old.

Someone asked him why he had tackled such a difficult task at his age.

Cato replied, "It is the earliest age I have left."

This parable reminds us that it is never too late to start a new beginning,

to start afresh in life,

to allow the seed of God's kingdom

to be planted in your soul.

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*