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“Confidence Comes from Within”

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

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, June 13, 2021

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Mark 4: 26-33

The Parable of the Growing Seed

[Jesus...] 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.’

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it.

Confidence comes from within

“There is an old Chinese tale

[that tells the tale] of a woman whose only son died.

“In her grief, she went to the holy man and said,

*‘What prayers, what magical incantations do you have
to bring my son back to life?’*

Instead of sending her away or reasoning with her,

he said to her,

*'Fetch me a mustard seed
from a home that has never known sorrow.
We will use it to drive the sorrow out of your life.'*

The woman set off at once in search of that magical mustard seed.
She came first to a splendid mansion,
knocked at the door, and said,
*'I am looking for a home that has never known sorrow.
Is this such a place? It is very important to me.'*

They told her, *'You've certainly come to the wrong place,'*
and began to describe all the tragic things that had recently befallen them.
The woman said to herself,
*'Who is better able to help these poor unfortunate people than I,
who has had misfortune of my own?'*

She stayed to comfort them,
then went on in her search for a home that had never known sorrow.
But wherever she turned, in hovels and in palaces,
she found one tale after another of sadness and misfortune.
Ultimately, she became so involved in ministering to other people's grief
that she forgot about her quest for the magical mustard seed,
never realizing that it had in fact
driven the sorrow out of her life."

[Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, (1981), Pages 110–11.]

She discovered, as so many others have,
as so many of us here learned firsthand,
that listening, loving, being kind and being present
not only heals one another,
these spiritual disciplines heal us, as well,
helping us to grow in confidence,
to grow in faith,
to grow in the knowledge that everything starts small.

A turning point in my life started small,
a small conversation,
a small sharing of wisdom.

Around the time I graduated from high school,
one of my older brothers, Jonathan, pulled me aside.
I had just said that someone else intimidated me.
Jon said, *"James, no one else can intimidate you. Intimidation comes from within.
So, too, does confidence.
Confidence comes from within.
Tap into your reservoir of confidence,
and you won't feel intimidated again."*

Sometimes the best gifts we receive are in the form of wisdom,
wisdom from those who have been there, done that, bought the t-shirt,
wisdom from those who love us,
who want us to live into the fullness of our true Self.

Tap into the confidence that God plants within you.
Be brave.
Show up.
Show up for class, even if you don't feel like it.
Show up for one another, even if it takes extra effort and energy.
Show up for life, because we need you, and you have so much to contribute.

Like the time one morning this guy wakes up and pulls the covers over his head,
telling his husband he doesn't want to go to work,
because no one there likes him.
His husband says, *"Get up! Get dressed. You have to go to work.
People are depending on you.
Besides, it's Sunday and you're the pastor and you're preaching!"*

Confidence comes from within

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.
However the first and biggest step is to show up, ready to go, with the help of God.
Christ's confidence in you
is seen in the word of encouragement he offers in this parable.
Jesus said the kingdom of God is like when the least of all 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 with a small beginning.
Everything must have a small beginning.
Nothing emerges full-grown.
God makes something out of something, often starting with the smallest of seeds,
the smallest concepts and ideas, the smallest germ of imagination.

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 in Jesus' time a grain of mustard seed
stood proverbially as the smallest possible thing.**

For example, for Jesus to say "*faith as a grain of mustard seed*"
was to say,

"the smallest conceivable amount of faith can move mountains."

You see, 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 Church of Jesus Christ.
The Church began with Christ sending the Holy Spirit,
then grew to include a few faithful followers
growing to touch souls and change lives in 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!
Yesterday someone said to me,

"I remember the time I learned that not everyone thinks like me.
What an amazing concept!"

Inner confidence feeds and supports our tolerance and affirmation of each other.
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:

God's Kingdom, God's Beloved Community.
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;
treasure that it is God -- not us -- who is responsible for growth.

The parable of the Mustard Seed teaches that God's Beloved Community
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,
to have a grain of faith in the Lord,
to be confident that we belong in God's story.

A new story, a brave new world has its genesis
with one of the tiniest of God's gifts: imagination.

God gives you and me an imagination so that with it
we might imagine and work and play toward a better world.
When you are in Christ, trusting that the Spirit is in you,
it is as if the whole world
has been made new, renewed, transformed, reformed.
What is your angle of vision?
What do you see?
What can you imagine?
What is Christ showing to you, giving to you,
offering to you to envision, reach for, make real?
And, of course, what can we imagine together as the Church?

Is this what Jurgen Moltman meant when he said,
*"We have attempted to view the resurrection
from the viewpoint of history.
Perhaps the time has come for us to view history
from the viewpoint of the resurrection."*

When the tomb was suddenly emptied on Easter morning
and Jesus got up and rose from the dead
the whole world had shifted on its axis.
All was new!
In a cosmic moment that shook the universe
the whole people of God
was made new, renewed, transformed, reformed.
See what happens when the smallest seed of faith

sprouts and grows and takes over your life!
Once God gives you the gift of resurrection power,
you are never the same, never the same.
You walk by faith, you see with vision, you imagine what can be,
and, my friends,
with Christ you overcome the fears that lie,
the borders that limit,
the shadows that seek to overcome the Light.

The late Howard Thurman was Dean of the Chapel at Marsh Chapel, Boston University.
He was a grand preacher, poet, and gentle prophet.
Howard Thurman was also the grandson of a slave.
He wrote about his grandmother who was a slave on a plantation
in that inhumane system of American slavery.
Particularly he shared the effect, the power, the love of the church
that the slaves attended on Sunday afternoon.
The white owner of the plantation
apparently thought that it would do the Black folks no harm
if the preacher went down
and told them about Jesus on Sunday afternoons.

Bishop Leontine Kelly once said that,
"If you want people to stay where they are put, don't tell them about Jesus."

So Howard Thurman's grandmother said of her preacher that,
"He hardly ever preached a sermon without going to Calvary."
The congregation nestled in the slave quarters
could always relate well to the story
of a man who was treated like dirt,
abused, beaten down and left for dead.

Thurman's grandmother said about her preacher,
*"When he went by Calvary he was always moved to shout,
"But God raised him again!
And he is seated at the right hand of God in heaven!"*

Then the preacher would take off his glasses,
and look straight into the eyes of the congregation,
and lean over the pulpit, and say to them in words undeniable,
*"But slaves, you are not any man's property.
You are children of God Almighty! Never forget it!"*

Howard Thurman's grandmother told him that,
*"...whenever the preacher would come to that part of the story,
her spine would stiffen, and she was ready to live another day."*

The Apostle Paul called that walking by faith, not by sight.
Jesus Christ called that imagining your place and purpose
in the Kingdom of God

with God's gifts of faith and confidence, planted deep within.

My friends, the Good News is

you are not anyone's property.

You are not limited or confined or defined by this world.

You are children of God Almighty!

Never forget it!

You are in Christ,

and the Living Christ has risen in you!

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