

A Tree Beyond our Imagination
Matthew 13.31-33 “Parable of the Mustard Seed”

The first thing I learned how to cook was my mom’s chili.

And let me be clear from the outset here, this wasn’t any ordinary chili, this is First Christian Church’s only two-time winner of the annual Chili-Cook Off chili.

This is the real deal.

We did all the prep work - crushing tomatoes, opening cans of beans, browning the ground beef, and of course boiling the water for the spaghetti.

I’m still amazed at how long it feels like it takes for water to boil. I’ll turn on the stove and step away for about 2 seconds, only to come back and be surprised that the water still hadn’t started boiling.

Making chili with mom was the first time I boiled water. I expected it to happen immediately. So I turned the stove on and to my dismay, nothing happened. I stood and watched for what felt like an eternity and still nothing was happening.

This is where I learned the true meaning of the phrase, “A watched pot never boils...”

I just get a little impatient. I’ve done all the work I’ve needed to and then I have to wait on something that is really just beyond my control.

As my New Testament professor Amy-Jill Levine liked to remind us, “Mustard seed is not, contrary to what Jesus states, the smallest of seeds; orchid and cypress seeds are smaller. Moreover, mustard seeds do not grow into giant trees.” There’s the black mustard seed which sprouts into a plant that can grow, given perfect agricultural conditions, 8-10 feet. Perhaps this is what Jesus is talking about, but even still, compared to a sequoia for example that grows 300 feet or a white oak that on average grows 80-100 feet, the mustard tree is relatively small. The term “tree” might even be a little generous.¹

So when Jesus says, the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds and grows into a giant tree - the good botanists first thought might be - **RIDICULOUS!** That cannot happen.

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, (New York: HarperOne Publishing, 2014) 170.

Jesus was never one to cater to standard expectations.

What Jesus us tells us then, is that God's kingdom is beyond our imagination - that from a mustard seed grows a tree, not a bush and not a small tree, the greatest of trees where the birds of heaven dwell in its branches.

The conclusion that something small grows into something big is correct, yet maybe not provocative enough - there's more to the story. As AJ liked to say, if you're comfortable with your interpretation of a parable, read it again because you're reading it wrong. There's a challenge here. And this parable has been challenging me all week.

Someone has to plant the seed, right?

And in this parable someone does... There's no name, just someone who took and sowed mustard seed into their field, like they had probably done many times before. As hopeful as ever that their crop would grow.

Planting seeds is an act of faith.

Take for example our garden outside... folks put in so much work planting the seeds, organizing it into rows, they're intentional about where they plant which seeds, which one's grow better next to others, they water it and spread compost, they care for it by pulling weeds and keeping it clean.

And then we wait... there's so much time and energy put into it and we still don't entirely know what it will produce. We have hopes, but we never really know what'll happen.

You could be like me with boiling water and obsess over it. But... if you keep exposing the seed to air, it'll never germinate; if you water it too much, seeds can drown; if you stand over it too long you'll block its sunlight and well, that's just not helpful.

“A watched pot never boils...”

It's a risk to plant seeds, it takes us out of our comfort zone, it forces us to give up control.

I don't know about you, but I do not like that.

And that's what makes this parable, in just two verses so rich, it challenges us to recognize that we are part of a larger process with all sorts of different elements working together to create something beautiful, that sometimes we need to get out of the way, and that God's vision is much bigger than ours.

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.

In many ways, this parable is a lesson in faith. Faith is not about certainty or control; rather it is the opposite. 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.

A few years ago I had the opportunity to be a Peace Intern with the Disciples Peace Fellowship. I traveled all summer to Disciples' church camps all across the country, 6 camps in 8 weeks, leading workshops and having conversations with high school youth about issues of peace and social justice.

I started out that summer thinking I was going to change the world. Spoiler alert: I didn't.

Instead I called my sister after the second week overwhelmed, full of self-doubt and crying, "I can't do this. What if I say the wrong thing? What if they think I'm a joke and don't take it seriously? What if no one learns anything from me?"

That summer I came to realization that my job wasn't to solve all the world's problems or make sure these kids "got it". My job was to plant seeds.

My responsibility, our collective responsibility, is to take the risk to help people know that they matter, to listen and actually hear, to partner in creating spaces for folks to feel loved, to learn how to love, and to start that collaborative work that just might change the world.

I don't know what the results of those seeds are, nor am I sure whether I will ever see the harvest. I do know the time spent imagining with those young folks about how to love the world more fully opened my eyes to ways of being church I had never considered. I know that they were engaged and passionate; that they asked

honest questions with deep courage; that they embraced the complex issues of the world with creativity and prophetic boldness.

Seeds were planted.

On the last night of camp in Iowa, we were worshipping around the campfire when a woman, whose name I for the life of me I can't remember, walked up to me, pointed at me, and said "stand up," as she handed me a cross necklace. "God is working in you whether you realize or not and I pray that you pay attention."

Seeds were planted.

She may never know the results of my story, but she planted a seed in me that I pray continues to grow.

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."²

Like taking a seed that supposedly grows into a bush and turning it into a massive tree, God is doing amazing things all around us. Our job... plant the seed.

Plant the seed in spite of the fact that we don't know yet what will come of it. It is a faithful risk and a life-giving opportunity - To be co-creators with God, knowing our role is to love others and that God's role is to transform that love into a world where all can flourish. We lay the bricks, God is the architect. We are the farmers, and God gives the growth.

And even more than that, this parable of the mustard seed reminds us that the kingdom of God is not just a miracle, happening out in the great beyond. It is ordinary. It starts small until it is something magnificent. Surprising us. Growing literally right in our backyard, from seeds that we have planted.

² "Excerpt from "A Future Not Our Own," attributed to now Saint Oscar Romero.

Those seeds are sprouting as we share produce that provides healthy meals for our neighbors experiencing hunger...they're sprouting as we gather around tables to break bread and hear the stories of the realities of a broken world, like we did just last night... they're sprouting as we spend time studying *Daring Greatly*, imagining together what vulnerability and authentic community can be like and laying the foundation for amazing ministry to happen.

In the grand scheme of kingdom building we get to do the hard work, the fun work, the life-giving work, the faithful work of planting seeds – not knowing what will happen, not even sure what the end result will be... yet I am hopeful that God is using us to do something significant.

Y'all we are just getting started.

“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!”³

“This parable is challenging. Jesus tells us 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 or water to boil. 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 to 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.”⁴

Church, “God is working in us whether you realize or not and I pray that we'll pay attention.”

³ Amy-Jill Levine and Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *The Marvelous Mustard Seed*, (Louisville, KY: Flyaway Books, 2018).

⁴ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 182.