

“The Mustard Seed”
Rev. Cynthia Wickwire Lundquist
June 13, 2021
Scripture: Ezekiel 17:22-24, Mark 4:26-34

I was visiting Princeton seminary looking at different seminaries across the country to decide where I would attend. Part of the visit included attending some classes to get an idea of the professors and the other students. The first class I attended was a Bible class. It was led by an older professor and since this was Princeton seminary, I knew he had to be a well-known scholar, very well read and undoubtedly had written numerous books. A young woman in the class proposed an interpretation of the passage they were looking at. And this Bible scholar who had been at work with the Bible for probably 40 years said to her “I have never considered that interpretation before. That’s really interesting.”

I love the study of scripture. It is a comfort, a guide, and a challenge. And I, like that professor, however, have found that over 30 years of preaching from scripture I am still being amazed, challenged, and inspired by new understandings. I am still growing in my appreciation for and my understanding of the sacred word. Yet, I admit it is easy to get set on an idea for a passage. Sort of once you’ve done some work, you’ve figured it out, you’ve preached that sermon, you got it, right? You know what it means. But, when I’m honest with myself and doing my task of preparing for a sermon the way I should, I usually find each time new insights, more challenges, more hope, and it’s as if the word is telling me do not close your mind to what I can tell you right now, what I can tell you in this time and place. So that when I do my task, I find new understandings coming to me frequently, greater clarity, greater depth and sometimes even a new direction from the passage. And this task is not just important for me if I’m going to be an authentic preacher but it is an important task for the whole church.

We may well remember and need to keep before us that in the past human desires have led us off track when studying the Bible. And we have distorted its message too often to endorse slavery, as the source of the domination and abuse even of women, to persecute gays and lesbians. But when we keep reading and studying scripture, we will find the truth and we can correct our course. And what better passage to start with than this one about this little teeny seed because I am suggesting that we find that this little passage carries a lot of truths. Now perhaps your response is as what mine tends to be--this passage I know very well; there really isn’t anything more here for me. But as I said that’s a trap that preachers fall into too easily and seldom is helpful. So let’s look a little closer and see what we might find.

The story of the mustard seed traditionally is a little bit like (and this is dating me but I’m hoping some of you remember the story) “The Little Engine that Could,” the little engine that needed that extra push to get over the hill. This passage had been taught to me and I had initially read it as a story about how just a little faith can do amazing things. So with more faith, oh my gosh, what could you accomplish! It told me that God gives me the power to do great things if I will just try, right? But as I prepared for this sermon and read the passage over again, I saw so much more than I had before. It’s right there in the very first sentence. “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, and he does not know how.” It’s a powerful and very clever way to remind us who is making the seed grow. It is God. The Ezekiel passage was included this morning because it’s a very powerful statement that all that occurs is through God’s power.

Now the next verse emphasizes this message even more reminding us that it is the earth that is producing the grain and then we have the harvest. So we’re being given the sequence of the seed is sown, it grows through God’s work, and then we get to harvest it. It’s a powerful context for the gift of the harvest because it guides in understanding what we are to do with it. We need to ask ourselves who grew the grain? God. Whose power produced the grain? God’s. Whose bread will be produced? Bread from God. Who do we thank for it? God. So who should decide how we use it? God. We may say grace at our table during our daily routine, but do we remember every moment of the day where our blessings come from? As we wield the power that we have been given, the resources that we have, do we consistently remember their source and consistently ask God’s guidance in their use? Do we humbly thank God for allowing us to be the reaper of this harvest? A number of years ago I chose to start donating to the Smithsonian Museum National Museum of African American History & Culture as one small step I could take towards fighting racism. Recently I received a certificate in the mail “honoring” me as a long time donor. As I looked at this passage and thought about what it was telling me and then looked at the certificate, I had mixed feelings. Because there was a part of me that felt actually I should be thanking them and God for the opportunity to support this endeavor. After all, it was God’s doing that gave me the ability to make a difference in this way. But the way of the world is to claim our accomplishments, to claim our deeds, to receive praise and then we can sometimes go down a dangerous path if we forget who is ultimately responsible. This passage is challenging us to turn that upside down and instead of demanding praise, giving thanks.

The next verses talk about the mustard seed specifically. Traditionally when reading this passage, I’ve focused on the end result, the greatest of all shrubs. I focused on the amazing things done, the amazing things I might be able to do with my faith. But as I reread it I started to think more about the seed. Instead of focusing on the great accomplishments, what if I focused on the fact that the tiny seed was enough to do what was needed. In other words, the seed isn’t the means to an end, the seed is the end, the message. We tend to think that if you can do this with a small seed, what greater, more amazing things can you do? And we focus on the power and the greatness at the end of the image. But what if the point of the passage rather is that a mustard seed is enough? You don’t need more to do what you need to do versus want to do. Notice, for example, what does it grow? A sequoia? A mighty oak? No. A shrub. A great shrub, but still a shrub.

Is it possible that, again, the focus is not on an amazing display of power that we might want—look at what I accomplished—but rather the reminder that this little seed is enough to do what’s needed. We humans tend to want more and more--usually we fear we won’t have enough. We want it all. The security we think comes with greatness. At the beginning of the pandemic you may remember there was a run on toilet paper—anyone remember that? Anyone go into a store and see empty shelves everywhere? I was in the grocery store early on in the pandemic staring at the empty shelf wondering what I would do when we ran out. And there was a man who came over next to me and looked at the

empty shelves as well. He said, “You know the other day a woman was in here and she filled her cart, filled it to the top with toilet paper.” He said, “I took two out of her cart. She started screaming at me and physically fought me for those two rolls when she had an entire cart of them.” That is the fear of not having enough. It may not seem comprehensible right now; we’re past that moment, things are getting back to normal. Most of us are just fine. But the truth is most of us have a fear like that deep down that can come into play. In truth, studies show that people with less often will give more readily and more generously than those who have more.

The seed should be our focus, not the size of the shrub. We should trust the seed that it is enough for us. It may not be a great sequoia but it is enough. We have enough, perhaps even more than we need. And so what do we do with these gifts, this power, this plenty that we have? The passage tells us we create something so that others may also thrive. God loved us and asked us to love our neighbor. So we ensure that what we have is released from our control, allowed to blossom so that all can blossom and thrive, the birds can build their nests, they can depend on us. In a country right now that everyone is judging and condemning one another, it’s an important message—that we are here to share and care for one another.

So, I found a lot as I went through this passage that I had not seen before. I realized that it is too easy to take that first interpretation that God can give us great power to accomplish great things and distort it into a message that might be more appealing but is certainly not more helpful or authentic. Because if we’re not careful, we may take that message of the power and start taking pride in what we’ve accomplished—we forget who actually grew the grain and we forget who gave us the seed and we start to think that the work is ours and the accomplishment is ours, and we claim the honor of the result as an honor that we deserve. The true source of the gifts are forgotten. We also can tend to emphasize the greatness of the shrub and that power and seek more because we will do so much with it forgetting that we are being reminded that the small seed and what it can accomplish is enough. We need to focus not on our hope for abundance but our fear of scarcity and recognize that we do have enough, we are living in abundance, and not let the fear control us, because the fear will destroy us. And in that way that we can distort this message, becomes a central truth. We tend to distort it and make it all about us—what I have done, what I need, what I want. And the other doesn’t even come into it nor does God. This distortion that comes out of the innocent reading isn’t just a bad Bible story lesson. The thing that is so sad is that it has consequences.

You may feel that I kind of went after the message a little too thoroughly. Ok, she kind of beat this one into the ground. But the truth is that the distortion of this passage can lead, and in fact has led, to actual human suffering. It is damaging to people of faith, to the church and to those with whom we interact. When we forget, for example, who gives us what we have and made our blessings possible, we worship not a generous God but meritocracy, which is the belief that we deserve what we have, we have earned it, we worked, it is ours. And that is contrary to the most basic Christian teaching. And this distorted understanding causes much damage. For example, it is a source of the racism that is racking this country. How many people here have you heard say, “Well if they just worked harder, they could have what I have.” But the problem with that, first of all, is it’s not just our work but more importantly they would have to start from the same place that we do—the same resources, the same sense of worth

affirmed by the culture and the same societal support and opportunity. But they don't start there; they start from a very different place. We have to remember what we have received without our effort to get an authentic picture of what is happening. We want to believe that we have rightfully earned all that we have. So we can't admit to ourselves that people of color don't have an equal chance because then we might have to admit that what we have isn't because of our own accomplishments. We deny that we've created a system that gives advantage so that we can avoid this painful truth. These systems guarantee that it is not an equal playing field. Systems in our school, medical care, our legal system, our institutions distort and create this uneven playing field. That's why it's called "systemic racism."

And when we live in fear of scarcity we are also led in wrong directions. We cannot share, we cannot trust, we cannot open ourselves to others because we might lose something of what we have and we have to have it all, don't we? Because we're scared, we're terrified of change or openness or a willingness to give. We build systems into our society to ensure that we won't have to share because we are threatened by it. We fear we won't have enough. And this again creates, amongst other things, racism, not just here in our country but around the world. So we ignore the other who threatens our security and live in our narrow worlds. But we forget a basic truth. We cannot live the lives God intends us to without the other, the neighbor, all neighbors.

I heard a lecture once from a black pastor from South Africa, and he taught me this saying. He made it very clear that this is in contrast to the famous statements that you may have learned in school—"I think therefore I am; I feel therefore I am"—great philosopher's wisdom from Western Europe. But this pastor challenged us with another understanding that he said came from African tradition. He said, "I am because we are."

In this parable the truth is that we need each other, that we cannot stand on our own, and this is found most truly in the reference to the birds. We might like to think, yes, we are the shrub holding up these nests with all of our power. And it seems like a good image, an image about the need to give and remember others but it has much more depth to it. Nature is a complex system and what we need to remember is that trees and shrubs need birds to thrive. They are interconnected. Shrubs and trees cannot exist if there are not birds and other creatures around. That is how God designed it and that is how God created human society in a rich diversity where we all need one another.

But how do we know that with this new interpretation we're going down the right path? We always need to take our interpretation and measure it against the universal truths of scripture. But I contend this interpretation does because it lifts up the same truths that are at the center of scripture. In fact the commandments that Jesus lifted up for us, first to love God as God has loved us, which means to live humbly in the wonder of it, acknowledging each day in everything we do. Who we are and what we have is of God and from God. And second, to love neighbor, all neighbors, truly and deeply as if our very lives depended on it—because they do.