

Sermon for Pentecost 6, Year A, Proper 12, July 24, 2011
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Good Morning!

A couple of years ago, I invited you, the congregation, to start bringing a can of food with you to church each Sunday. In response to the downturn of the economy, I felt one of the things that we could do as a parish was have a weekly food drive to support the work of the University District Food Bank. It was intended to be a simple gesture – something that we could all do to help those who were feeling pinched (or crunched) by the economy. This effort on our part continues week by week. The ushers bring forward not only the bread and wine for the eucharist, but they bring the baskets of food and household items that you bring to church with you. The food is blessed and picked up later in the week by the food bank and included in their food distribution.

It is clear that our offering of food will not bring about widespread change. A small number of people will benefit from what we collect. Cynics might say that if we truly cared for the down and out, we would be doing much, much more. But the response of faith would say that while much more could and should be done, this small offering of ours still counts. It is a small gesture of concern, of compassion, a desire to help. In God's eyes, nothing is ever lost in the small acts and gestures of care and compassion.

What we are engaged in is a kind of mustard seed conspiracy. Tom Sine, a Christian futurist, who lives in the Puget Sound area, wrote a book by that title, "The Mustard Seed Conspiracy." In it he calls Christian people to join in with God, to be co-conspirators with God, by doing the works of God and subverting the craziness, the dysfunction, the sinfulness of the world with acts of compassion and love. These gestures by the people of God may seem small and insignificant in the eyes of others, but they add up and they go a long ways towards revealing the Kingdom or Reign of God in our midst. The invitation that Tom Sine extends is for each of us to become mustard seed people, co-conspirators with God, to subvert the world in love for the purpose of promoting God's ways in the world.

In our gospel lesson this morning from Matthew, Jesus makes a very interesting statement about what the Kingdom of God is like. One of the analogies he uses is that of a mustard seed. I remember some years ago having a book mark from the Holy Land that was laminated in plastic. Sealed inside the plastic was a tiny seed that was identified as a mustard seed. The seed was just a speck of a thing, and if it in fact was a mustard seed, it would certainly fit the description provided in the gospel lesson that the mustard seed was the tiniest of seeds.

But what is intriguing about this analogy comparing the Kingdom of God to the mustard seed is the end product. The mustard bush or shrub is essentially a weed. If you are a gardener living in the Holy Land, the last thing you want is a mustard seed growing among your vegetables and flowers. The mustard seed essentially takes over. It is a common, fast-spreading plant that grows to about four feet in height.

What is interesting about this gospel lesson is the image that Jesus didn't use to compare the Kingdom of God. In the minds of many people, both then and now, the notion of Kingdom brings to mind something big, and fantastic, and great. For the people of Jesus' time, they might have expected Jesus to use another image to describe the Kingdom – and an appropriate example of that time would have been the cedars of Lebanon. These were enormous trees comparable to the redwoods in California. The cedars of Lebanon could grow to two to three hundred feet or more in height. They were huge and majestic trees. We could understand people thinking of the cedars of Lebanon as an apt comparison to describe the Kingdom of God. But Jesus rejected that image and uses, instead, a small, unremarkable, fast-growing weed to describe the Kingdom. I might add that there were rabbinical laws that prohibited mixing certain plants in a garden. The mustard seed, as a weed, was essentially deemed an illegal and unclean plant to mix with, say, vegetables. I think this gives us some idea about the provocative nature of this illustration for the people of Jesus' time. It goes against everything that we consider large and impressive.

I think if Jesus were walking among us in the Pacific Northwest, he might use the illustration of ivy, or scotch broom, or morning glory to describe the Kingdom.

According to Tom Sine, we are called to be mustard seed people, engaged in a mustard seed conspiracy with God. It suggests that God's greatest work is

not accomplished in grandiose ways. The Kingdom of God is found in our everyday lives with all their ups and downs. It's revealed in the willingness to listen to others, to provide a helping hand, to give an encouraging word, to take the time to be with others in their need. The Kingdom is perhaps most visible in the modest changes in our attitudes and in the little improvements in our behavior that others may not notice, including ourselves. To be mustard seed people is to live ordinary lives that are increasingly characterized by compassion, care, patience, and concern for others.

There is one final observation that I would make about being mustard seed people. And it is best described in a story about Mother Theresa. She was visited by a group of reporters who wanted to write a story about her and her work in the slums of Calcutta. They were with her first thing in the morning when the doors of her hospital were opened and they watched in silence as a continual stream of people flowed in – people who were ill, people who were dying, and people who were suffering. One of the reporters asked her after several minutes of watching countless numbers of people filing in, “Is it like this every day?” And she said, “yes.” And after a few more moments, he said to her in some exasperation, “But if you really cared about these people, you would want to approach the government and advocate for change. You should be organizing people to pressure the government. If you really cared about these people, you would be trying to do something more successful to change their circumstances.” And Mother Theresa said very simply in response, “God didn't call me to be successful. God called me to be faithful.” Our concern as mustard seed people is being faithful, not successful.

In being mustard seed people, we are content with small changes and simple gestures. If change comes in large and dramatic ways, that's fine. But as mustard seed people, we are at home with changes that seem to be insignificant. And we take solace knowing that we are partners with God, and that the Kingdom, like the mustard seed, is fast growing and pervasive, literally right under our noses. We are simply doing our part, working with God, to subvert the world with love.