

The Greatest of All Shrubs

Rev. Eugene N. Nelson, Jr.
The Community Church of Sebastopol
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Matthew 13:31-33; 36-43

There is a story we like to tell in our denomination, The United Church of Christ. Indeed it is a story also told by Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Disciples of Christ, and to some extent, even Americana Baptists. It is a story that remembers a time, in the fifties, early sixties, when our churches were part of the mighty mainline denominations. We had influence, we had power, we had full churches and bulging Sunday Schools on Sunday mornings. We built great buildings with tall steeples right in the heart of town, and everybody who was anybody came to our churches. Ah yes, those were the days. Of course, today each of those denominations is in decline, losing members, national staff and money year after year – members getting older and attracting fewer and fewer families with children. In this day of gleaming evangelical mega-churches, the old mainline denominations now are more on the sideline. We ain't what we used to be. Ah, but there was a time when we were the powerhouse center of American Protestantism. Yes, that's the story we tell. But is that story true?

In a recent article in *Christian Century Magazine*, church historian, Ted Campbell, says those memories of our glory days are more myth than actual history. Yes, our churches were larger and we had more people, but we never statistically represented anything close to a majority of Americans. Even in those halcyon days of the 1950's, our combined church membership only represented 16.8% of the U.S. population. We know we are in a minority now, especially in a place like Sonoma County, but in fact we were a minority then. And perhaps that is good news. Perhaps we can let go of our longing for the way we were, because the way we were wasn't all that great anyway. Instead, let's focus on the way we are, where we are going today, on the possibility that our best days might very be before us.

One thing I appreciate about this church, that keeps me excited about our shared ministry, is that we have a number of people who simply refuse to buy into this mentality of decline – that all we can do is hang on for dear life and hope for the best. No, we take the risk of building a new building, then find a person like Rachel to bring our church school program alive in that building. Kristen leaves us and rather than cutting back, we find Lydia who will join us in August and we trust she will lead a growing and active youth program, again with its home in the new building. In spite of the inevitable bumps in the road, we still dare to look ahead to a hopeful future for our church and our life together.

I once heard a pastor say, "All I need is for God to send me about four or five laypeople, people who will step up and say that this church has a future, and then commit to that future." Often, that's all it takes... four or five committed and caring people willing to make something happen in the church – from a mission trip to a women's retreat to planning an apple pie sale. And I continually thank God that over the years, people like that have stepped up in the life of our church. Which, at long last, brings me to our parable for today.

In all honesty, as I was working with this text, I found myself wondering exactly why Jesus told this parable of the mustard seed. Where is the good news here? Is this a word of encouragement for our often struggling churches? "The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field." Jesus tells us that it is the smallest of seeds. I'm not sure if that is true, but Jesus' was never beyond exaggerating a bit in his stories... rather like me describing a fishing trip. The mustard seed is planted and grows into a great... shrub? The Kingdom of God is like a shrub? When Mark tells the story, he leaves it a shrub. Matthew, perhaps realizing that a bit more is needed, adds that the shrub becomes a tree. But still... a shrub? Why not a redwood or one of the great cedars of Lebanon? Why is the Kingdom of God compared to a tiny seed and a shrub?

Reflecting on this text, former United Methodist Bishop, William Willimon says, "Jesus wants us to think small. Tiny seeds – unimpressive shrubs. Perhaps Jesus would be impressed by the evangelist who sleeps at the White House, but this parable suggests that he might be even more impressed by the pastor in North Dakota who has never even seen the White House, much less talked to the President, because he has been serving the Lord's Supper for the past thirty years to a hundred souls in a little church at a remote crossroads."

I find that an interesting take on this parable... Jesus inviting us to think small. It seems so counter-cultural, so opposed to the way we are taught to think and act. I confess that as a pastor I am always looking for ways we can grow, do more, be more visible in the community. We seem to sew so many small seeds. I want a big harvest. That's not all bad. But there is danger when the church – and its pastor – are tempted to derive their status, their sense of importance, from those forms of power and influence valued by the world. Bigger is better! All that matters is results! Just show me the bottom line! Really? Then why does Jesus say that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed? It just might be that when we think about the kingdom of heaven, the work that God is doing in the world, we make a big mistake if we think only using the categories gathered from the kingdoms of the world, if we look at God's work among us only through the eyes of the world. It just might be that what the world considers to be small and inconsequential, God considers to be nothing less than revolutionary.

A pastor shares this story: "I know a woman in her 80's who bakes oatmeal cookies twice a week and takes them to the local youth detention facility. I thought it a charming gesture. It's so nice for an older person to occupy herself baking cookies for others. But when I talked to the superintendent of that facility, he told me, 'Those cookies have transformed this whole place. Some of the young men who are incarcerated here have never in their whole lives received a gift from anybody until they got a bag of those cookies. They stand at the door, behind bars, eagerly awaiting those cookies, as if they were a bunch of little boys on Christmas Day. Those cookies have changed them.'" Says the pastor, "I will never again look at an oatmeal cookie in the same way." The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. So insignificant, and yet...

On Thursday, a few folks from our Mission and Outreach Board – again, it doesn't take many - met at the church and made lunches, then went over to Safari West where they hosted a lunch for kids from the Valley of the Moon Home. Safari West provided a free tour. A good time was had by all. Not much, perhaps, just a lunch and a tour. And yet, who knows what seeds were planted in those kids that day and how they might grow.

I am sure a number of us look around at the old church from time to time, look at our triumphs and struggles, and wonder if this is really an expression of the kingdom of heaven on earth. Again, it seems we sew many small seeds. It is easy to feel like an insignificant small shrub and wonder if we really make any difference at all. I don't know about you, but there are those times when I look in the mirror and wonder if Jesus wishes he had called brighter, more faithful, more courageous disciples than me? But the fact is that we are the best he has. There is nobody but us. Says Willimon, "I know people who have been looking for the 'perfect' church all of their lives – a pure, faithful, undeniably obvious church. I know pastors who have spent 30 years on the verge of active ministry. They are ready to get into ministry if they can ever find that truly good church to serve. But the truth is, this church, our church, is the only 'good church' there is. For better or worse, this is the form the Risen Christ has chosen to take in the world. This we believe."

And so Jesus tells the story of a tiny seed that grows into a shrub. Perhaps not much to look at, perhaps it doesn't draw a lot of attention or even respect, but that shrub, for all its limitations, is a miraculous sign of the work of God. This, it would seem, is the way God does things. God chooses to enter the world, redeem the world, through a Jewish peasant from a little out-of-the-way village in Judea. God chooses to be present in the world and bless the world through a sometimes foolish, thoroughly human institution called the church. God has chosen, we dare to believe, to bless our corner of the world through this congregation, even though much of our corner of the world seemingly couldn't care less. But we care.

In a few moments, we will share in Holy Communion. We will share a bit of bread and just a few drops of juice. And yet, as we share this simple meal, we will proclaim that this is as close as we can get to the risen Christ – as close as we can get to the sacred mystery that is the Christian faith. Just bread and a little juice.

And so it is that we pay attention to that which the world regards as small and inconsequential. We dare to believe that through seemingly small gestures – small seeds – of caring and compassion, love and justice – the world shifts a bit on its axis, the Kingdom, that new heaven and new earth, does draw closer and the world is blessed – we are blessed.