

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for World Communion Sunday, October 3, 2010  
Lessons: Isaiah 42:1-9 and Luke 13:18-21; 17:5-10

## MUSTARD SEED

Most of us, I think, have our keepsakes, items of little monetary or utilitarian value that are important to us because they represent more than they are in themselves. They are tokens of our experiences, relationships, hopes, or dreams. One of my keepsakes is an inexpensive key chain with a tiny plastic capsule. Inside is a mustard seed. I know who gave it to me and when. I also know why. I know the promise represented by that little seed inside its scratched and clouded capsule where I can barely see it now, and I know that what the seed represents is still there, also, no matter how scratched and clouded its human capsule may be.

“The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed . . . .” “If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed . . . .” God works in small ways, quiet but redemptive ways, which is an assurance I find both comforting and encouraging because my faith is small while the problems of human life in our world are large, destructive, and frustratingly hard to cure. The evils that people do out of greed and lust for power never seem to go away but keep coming back in new forms. Sometimes I find myself wondering, “Don’t we ever learn?” In those times, it helps me to remember the promise the mustard seed represents. The small change of heart, the new spirit, will grow. God’s compassion will not be snuffed out. Justice will not be forever denied to the poor and powerless.

Let me make an important distinction here. Grand schemes for imposed order and especially for profit generate injustices, always personal for the individual but often also pervasive for some group of people whose exploitation benefits others. As Buffy Sainte-Marie sang to us years ago, hauntingly of the native peoples of the Americas, “Can’t you see that their poverty’s profiting you?”<sup>1</sup> So, yes, sometimes overcoming injustices requires a large-scale social project, a big cooperative effort to liberate the oppressed and secure the disenfranchised, the poor and vulnerable. Such movements toward freedom and well-being for many people do require us to be on guard against clever, self-serving ways to milk even justice for profit, but I believe we can distinguish social movements that give people greater freedom and capacity to live responsibly from grand schemes that exploit many people for the benefit of a few who already enjoy great benefits. I would not like to see the symbol of the mustard seed corrupted into selfish individualism that bans faith and the gospel of Jesus Christ from social justice. Without trying to seize privilege or force our beliefs upon the

society, the churches can be prophetic for Christ, challenging established power that oppresses people and systems that turn human beings into disposable commodities, things to be used then thrown away.

Our model is the Servant of the LORD God we find in the second section of Isaiah, and it is our model because Jesus took it for himself. He became the servant who rejected power and prestige, who would not snuff out even the dimly burning wick or break off the already bruised reed. He came with compassion for the wounded, the failed, the weak, the broken in body and spirit. “But what about God’s judgment?” we might ask. Jesus’ compassion is God’s judgment. That truth is hard for us to grasp: that Jesus’ compassion for the sinful and suffering is God’s judgment upon all our human systems — political, social, economic, and religious — and is also God’s judgement upon our personal value systems, the way we rank ourselves and other people and reasons we give or withhold respect. Wherever we scorn compassion, there judgment falls upon us, but wherever compassion overrules our negative judgments upon ourselves or others, there God’s grace lifts us up. God’s love is greater than our shame, guilt, or fears. The First Letter of John to the churches insists God is greater than our own consciences when they condemn us and try to hold us down by rebuking hope.<sup>2</sup> Human judgment is assessment by standards. God’s judgment is compassion. If we want it or need it, even if we find it hard to accept for ourselves, then that compassion is for us. If we hate it, reject our own need for it and deny it to others, then God’s compassion becomes our judgment.

Jesus’ parable about the attitude of the servant is difficult to understand and a little hard to take. We are not to be benefactors but servants. In the Greco-Roman world, the benefactor was a rich person (usually a man) who enhanced his own greatness by giving charity to the poor, who were then expected to love and honor him as their superior for whose largesse they were most grateful. Jesus tells his disciples they must never become benefactors. We must not see ourselves as benevolent. We must not give for thanks, praise, or prestige. We must not bask in the warm glow of our own charity. Instead, we are to meet the poor and disadvantaged as our equals, as sisters and brothers rather than objects of our benevolence. We are to learn and accept the attitude of the servant who expects no thanks. After all, once we truly realize that all we have is God’s gift to us (unless we have taken more than our share by greed and advantage), then we know that we are not really giving anything at all but sharing what God gives us to share.

Jesus’ hard saying that we should think of ourselves as unworthy servants means to me, not that we should put ourselves down, but rather that we can give up the self-assessments by which we measure ourselves as better or less than others, as worthy of praise and reward or undeserving, as superior or inferior. Our worth to God is infinite but also personal, which means we do not need to compete with each other for value. Jesus calls us

to serve as he has served us and given himself for us. We don't need power or prestige; we need the right spirit and the mind of Christ, who chose the way of the Servant.

Jesus challenges the systems that evaluate people as worthless, whether those systems are political, economic, religious, or moral. He refuses to see us as worthless or even as worth less than others. Where love does the measuring, there is hope for all people. So, among Jesus' followers were beggars, irreligious sinners, and prostitutes. Compassion is God's judgment. Empathy is God's grace at work. The attitude God's compassion enables in us is that of the servant, following the way of our Servant Lord. The tools (or weapons, if you must) of God are understanding and respect, empathy and compassion, hope and healing — all tiny mustard seeds planted in a world ruled by power and fueled by fear, greed, and murderous rage.

Inside the scratched and clouded plastic capsule is a mustard seed, given to me at my confirmation by the person who taught me faith. God works in small ways, not grand schemes that push people around and take away our freedom. God wants true attitudes behind helpful actions because God cares more about our hearts than our reputations or our warm feelings of benevolence either. Jesus calls us to share what we are given — of life, of life's abundance, of grace, of forgiveness, of compassion, of understanding, of hope, and of peace. My faith may not yet have attained the size of a mustard seed, but it's there, and I know it's all I really have for dealing with life and living it, and I believe God will make it grow and be enough. Amen.

Notes:

1. Buffy Sainte-Marie, "My Country 'Tis of Thy People You're Dying."
2. First John 3:18-19, where "heart" is better understood as "conscience," which is what we call the inner voice of self-rebuke and condemnation. "And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything." (NRSV)