

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend Sara Dorrien-Christians  
Sunday, July 26, 2020

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### **Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52**

He put before them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.’ He told them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.’ ‘The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. ‘Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. ‘Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ‘Have you understood all this?’ They answered, ‘Yes.’ And he said to them, ‘Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.’

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman did an interview a while back with Krista Tippet, the creator and host and the podcast, “On Being,” and in that interview he made the case for the church returning to a time when people of faith primarily used imagery — rather than doctrine — to make sense of God and their life before God. He said, “doctrine closes and closes — coming up with formula — but biblical poetry *opens and opens*, which is what we need. We need to relish the images, to make them our framework of life and faith.”

In today’s passage, Jesus gives us no shortage of images for the Kingdom of Heaven, as Matthew puts it...in the other gospels it’s called the Kingdom of God.

We’re given a list of similes ...

- The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed.
- The Kingdom of God is like yeast.
- The Kingdom of God is like treasure hidden in a field.

The plethora of examples indicates that Jesus appreciated imagery, too. Especially when it came to describing something as unfathomable as The Kingdom of God.

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Today I want to focus on that first example...the mustard seed that eventually grows into a tree. As an image, I find it evokes a lot for me because of the memories tied to it.

The seed alone is significant.

Do you remember when this story was shared by your Sunday school teacher — maybe decades ago? Did she bring a mustard seed to class, placing it on the floor in front of you and your peers as you gawked at just how tiny it was?

Did you carefully pass it around, feeling it between your fingers?

The seed alone communicated something profound: from small beginnings come great things.

It's an especially significant object lesson for children because they know what it is like to feel small and insignificant in their world.

Children or not, we can all name some mustard seeds...those people and places and things that might appear small and insignificant but contain a world of possibility.

When I'm walking around big cities, especially, I love taking photos of the churches nested in busy city blocks. Many of them are quite large and impressive cathedrals themselves, but in some cities they barely peer out from the abundance of skyscrapers that surround them. At some point in time, their steeples were probably seen for miles, but now you have to be almost at their doorstep and looking straight up to see their magnitude. Majestic as some of these churches are, they look small in their surroundings.

Many of them maintain open doors to their sanctuaries, and once inside, you feel like you've stepped into another universe. Soft candles illumine stained glass windows and handfuls of people with bowed heads, finding some solace in the middle of a stressful day. There is almost always an un-housed person catching some undisturbed sleep on a pew.

Travelers flock to these sanctuaries as well. When they've become completely lost, sanctuaries are places where they can rest their feet and carefully study their maps and find their way home... literally and figuratively.

Increasingly, churches feel rather mustard seed-like amidst the skyscrapers and the cult of busy-ness and speed that surround them.

Of course, the real crux of this parable isn't what the mustard seed IS but what it DOES.

This seed might look tiny but it becomes a rather nasty weed.

In the 37-book series on "Natural History," Pliny the Elder described it succinctly: "(The mustard seed) grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted: but on the other

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hand **when it has once** been sown **it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it**, as the seed when it falls germinates at once.”

The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed...

It is **relentless**. It is **persistent**. It is **wild**. It slowly takes over the place it has been scattered, which is surely a nuisance for those who were satisfied with that field just the way it was.

When we are talking about the Kingdom of God we're talking about something that's more pervasive than dominant, as New Testament scholar Bernard Brandon Scott puts it.

And we're always talking about something that feels like a mixed blessing, at least in the messy beginning.

As we find ourselves four months into a pandemic that's upended our lives, punctuated by our country's reckoning with a racist past and present, and as we try to discern the way forward as individuals, as a society, as the church...

I'm especially struck today by the call I hear in this imagery: *sow the seeds*.

There's intention there.

Someone took and sowed that mustard seed in his field, knowing full well what would happen to his field.

There is a **cooperating** with God's vision here. There is a **ceding** of control. There is **abiding trust**.

Who knows what will become of that field once the seed gets in there?

There's a Presbyterian Church on the upper west side of Manhattan that has been around for over one hundred years, but there haven't been enough people to maintain a worshipping community there for about 20 years. The building is old and not being used by a congregation, and there have been several attempts by developers to tear it down and build something more lucrative in its place. But so far, the neighborhood where the church resides hasn't let that happen. They've rallied a number of times to save the building, preserving it for the community's use.

The reason for their passion is not only preservation of an historic building, but it is their remembrance of the good the church did for the neighborhood in years long past. They remember the open doors for folks who are on their feet all day, and cups of coffee brewed for Alcoholics Anonymous meetings; they remember food drives during the Holidays and “blessing of the backpacks” for the neighborhood children. Even though most in the neighborhood never considered joining and probably wouldn't if a worshipping body was resurrected today, what they remember and value is that the church was a place for the community to gather, and a place where real and specific needs were met. The congregation is gone, but the neighbors surrounding the place continue the congregation's mission in one way or another.

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That patch of earth hasn't so easily freed itself from the seeds scattered by a congregation that met and witnessed decades ago.

The church today, like the church yesterday, is called to sow the seed, and then to live in the inevitable mess that it creates — trusting that there is life on the other side. Dr. Scott points out that a mustard seed becoming a tree would be a biological miracle — which was probably Jesus' way of emphasizing two truths: The Kingdom of God — like a tree — is beyond our comprehension,

*And* the faithful are called to sow the seeds that make the mess, knowing full well that we will live there for a lifetime.

In this season of pandemic, we have sown seeds, Idlewild. We have fed people. We have made true statements. We have begun the hard work of confession and repentance.

Mid-South Food Bank Mobile pantry.

Black Lives Matter.

An impending study on anti-racism that will turn our focus inward in new and uncomfortable and hopefully transformative ways.

We are sowing seeds that we will scarcely be able to free ourselves of, and that's a good thing — because it's God's stubborn Kingdom unfolding amongst us, and sometimes even in spite of us.

I want to end with a prayer written by Archbishop Oscar Romero. Archbishop Romero served in El Salvador in the 60's and 70's against the backdrop of a severely repressive and U.S.-backed government, and a civil war that ripped the country apart. He spoke out against human rights abuses, poverty, and the violence that consumed both the government and the rebels, and he was assassinated while leading Mass in 1980. This is his prayer:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the Church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about: We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they will hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities.

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We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us do something, and to do it well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for God'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. Amen.