

I

Those of you who know me know that I have the basic New York attitudes of trying to do too much myself and wanting everything immediately. I have somewhat of a typical city boy attitude. I definitely would have made a terrible farmer. Even now I'll go out to the flowers and say, "Come on, let's cut the bud stuff and start blooming." Farmers have to be patient. Farmers also have to recognize that they really can't do things themselves. They have to depend upon nature.

The gospel reading, from Mark, contains two parables that farmers would certainly understand, but which drive city slickers like me nuts. The first is the parable of the seed. The farmer plants the seed and goes about his routine day, day after day. Eventually the seed grows, not because the farmer does something special, but because nature took its course. By the way, to the ancients every field of wheat, every flower, was a miracle of God's hand. The second parable is that of the mustard seed which seems insignificant, but with the growth that God gives becomes a plant, probably 8 to 10 feet, large enough to shelter the birds of the sky. These two parables of the Kingdom of God tell us that we have to trust in God to give growth to the Kingdom. Furthermore, the growth He gives will be greater than we could ever imagine. The kingdom that we trust God to give growth to could be the Kingdom of our church in the world, the Kingdom of our parish right here, or, particularly, the Kingdom of our home.

There are many times that we expect too much of ourselves and others. To make matters worse, we expect too much to happen too soon. Sometimes parents expect their 15 year olds to act like 21 year olds. Sometimes we get thoroughly disappointed in ourselves because we are not the perfect people we like to imagine ourselves being. Sometimes we are impatient with how we or others are progressing in life. We may be upset with our home situations, our marriages, our families, our jobs, or what have you. What we have to understand is that none of us are self-made men and women. If we trust in God, He will give growth. This growth might be very subtle, nothing we can put our fingers on. But after a while it suddenly occurs to us: God has brought us a long way. If we trust in God the growth that He gives us will be more than we could imagine. We are all small seeds, but God can make of us great trees. However, if we think that we can do everything ourselves, and if we don't trust in God, we won't get anywhere. None of us can make ourselves or others grow.

Let me be a bit more specific with something that we all want: peace in our families. We have to pray to God and trust Him to bring his peace. To think we can cause peace to happen in our homes or anywhere without God is to give ourselves power we don't have.

I am not the only person in this parish who puts too much pressure on himself or herself. I am not the only person in this parish who is always looking for results. But all of us have entrusted God with our lives. We must trust Him to form us in people more beautiful than we could have ever imagined.

After all, He does a pretty good job with flowers.

II

I have a question for our retirees this morning. Did you pick up any new hobbies when you retired from your job? Most people I know say they are busier in retirement than they were in their working years, so taking up a new hobby may be difficult. So, let me ask our non-retirees, what hobby do you hope to adopt in your retirement years?

I ask this because I was inspired by reading about a retired Canadian man named Young S. New. New picked up an interesting new hobby when he retired. His new hobby was picking up spare change off the streets of his home city, Montreal, Canada.

New's father was a frugal man who raised New with the mantra, "Respect the penny." Respect the penny. The tiniest, least-valuable monetary unit in our society. Yet Young New's father knew that if you save enough pennies, you make a dollar. And if you save enough dollars, you make \$100. And if you save enough hundreds. . . well, you get the picture. Don't overlook the value of little things because little things can add up to big things someday.

So after he retired, Young S. New began walking through his neighborhood each day collecting spare change he found on the ground. He donated all the money he found to charity. New's neighbors noticed his hobby, and they joined in. Soon, New created a coin collectors club for Canadians who wanted to collect change for charities. No one has kept records on how much money the coin collectors club has found and donated. But they've been going strong for 12 years now, so they've probably donated a substantial amount. (1)

One man decides to collect discarded coins to give to charity. His neighbors, inspired by his example, join in. Who will be inspired next, and what good will they contribute to the world? Maybe it will be someone in this congregation this morning. We need people like that—people who make a positive impact on our world.

I want you to remember this man and his simple philosophy, his simple act of collecting loose change, as you consider our Bible passage for this morning.

Again (Jesus) said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade."

According to William Barclay, mustard was not a garden plant. Mustard plants in Palestine grew in the wild. Even though the mustard seed is the tiniest of all seeds, the mustard plant can grow 8-12 feet high. (2)

Jesus compared the kingdom of God to a mustard seed. He called it the tiniest seed on earth but when it grows up, it is taller than any of the other plants in the garden with branches so large that the birds of the air can make their nests in its shade. On another occasion he told his disciples that if they had as much faith as a grain of mustard seed, they could say to a sycamore tree, "Pluck yourself up by the roots and plant yourself in the sea and it would

obey.” (Luke 17:6) Obviously there is more power in an act of faith than you or I may have ever imagined.

There are three elements of mustard seed faith that we want to consider this morning. These are also three important elements to successful living.

First of all, small actions can lead to major accomplishments. Like the Almighty God of Creation working through ordinary people and ordinary circumstances. Like the Eternal God creating opportunities for good right here and right now. We are so busy looking for the big calling, the big vision, the big miracle, the big ministry God has for us to do that we overlook the little opportunities all around us. If we overlook the little good works we can do, the little kindness or encouragement or hope we can offer, if we overlook the little ways we can shine God’s light in the world, then we will not be prepared for the big opportunities God has to use us for His glory.

In his book *How God Works*, Edward T. Sullivan writes, “When God wants an important thing done in this world, or a wrong righted, He goes about it in a very singular way. He does not release His thunderbolts or stir up His earthquake. He simply has a tiny, helpless baby born, perhaps in an obscure home, perhaps of a very humble mother. Then he puts the idea or purpose into the mother's heart, she puts it into the baby's mind and then—God waits.”

Let me ask you a question this morning: Is God waiting for you? God has placed the power of His kingdom inside of you. God has placed the vision of His kingdom inside of you. And now God is waiting for you to do your part in establishing His kingdom on this earth. Let me suggest that you begin praying on a daily basis, “God, the Bible says you made me for good works (Ephesians 2:10). Please show me the good works you want me to do today.”

Pray this in the morning, the afternoon, the evening. Opportunities will grow around you like a mustard plant. But God only provides the opportunities and the power. You have to make the decision to do the good works, to display God’s character and priorities and values to the world. Is God waiting for you?

Successful people are aware of the little things. Little choices become ingrained habits. A little extra effort sets you apart from the pack. Attention to little details results in producing an excellent product. Those few million details spell the difference between success and failure. That is true in relationships, in business, and it is true in shaping a life. As an Ethiopian proverb puts it: “When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion.”

From a negative side, little things matter as well. It is not the major sins that bring about our downfall. President Reagan loved to tell the story of a lady who knocked on a man’s door and said, “Do you own a black Pit Bull dog?”

The man said, “Yes.”

The lady said, “I have to tell you it’s dead.”

The man demanded, “What do you mean it’s dead? What happened?”

And the lady said, "My Pekinese killed it."

And the man said, "Your Pekinese killed it? How?"

She said, "It got stuck in his throat."

That's gross, I know. But, as King Solomon is reported to have written, it is "the little foxes that destroy the vines" (Song of Solomon 2:15).

The gospel itself is a rather unique celebration of the seemingly small and insignificant. Bethlehem was a small town. Nazareth was too. Calvary was a tiny spot on the globe. There was nothing particularly significant about the profession of carpenter or fisherman or tax-collector. Yet these are the people who became Jesus' disciples, his followers. These are the people who created the early church and wrote the testimonies in the Bible. These are the people who changed the world.

The tiny mustard seed planted 2,000 years ago by Jesus and his disciples must have shown little promise. Life is like that. Look to the little things, the little opportunities and circumstances where you can share God's love and truth and compassion each day. Mustard seed faith, first of all, says that small actions can lead to major accomplishments.

In the second place, mustard seed faith celebrates the importance of attitude to accomplishment. Where there is faith in God, there is hope. Where there is faith in God, there is joy. Where there is faith in God, there is peace. Faith is a positive force. Faith is an active force.

Studies performed in hospitals and nursing homes indicate that patients who have cheerful feelings about impending surgery recover faster from the operation. Those who express fears about postsurgical discomfort not only report more pain but also take longer to recover. Experts say that doctors can reduce hospital stays by asking patients about their fears and counseling them.

Many years ago, the writer for the popular "Ann Landers" advice column was asked about the dominant theme she saw in the thousands of letters she received from people seeking advice. Landers replied that the dominant theme in all her letters was a sense of fear. People wrote to her because they were afraid of losing a significant relationship, losing their job, losing their security, losing their wealth. Even sadder, they were afraid to take action to change the things that scared them. They needed advice and encouragement, but they also needed someone to inspire them to take action to deal with their fear.

We are all afraid of losing the things that are important to us. But Jesus-followers have a weapon for fighting fear. We do that by focusing on the goodness of God's character and the certainty of God's promises. And God promises that His kingdom is all around us. Wherever God's Spirit is present, that's where God's kingdom is made real. How can we be negative, fearful, passive or apathetic when we carry the presence and power of God with us wherever we go?

Former NFL coach Tony Dungy writes that faith plays a big role in successful teamwork. Coaches, according to Dungy, assign each player a role based on a particular end result. The players may not understand how their obedience to the game plan contributes to the end result, but their faith in their assignment is an important ingredient in their success or failure.

Dungy writes, “We [also] have to trust that the assignment God has given us is the right one, whether it looks like we’re in the middle of the action right now or not. We need to know that the people and circumstances around us are running a pattern that will work out for good . . . As we carry out our assignments faithfully, the results will come. We need to forsake our natural instincts and play our position, no matter how things look, and trust that the plan will work. That’s what it means to live by faith, not by sight.” (3)

So, trusting God is key to a positive, effective attitude. God’s game plan is to establish Heaven on Earth, His kingdom of peace, love, justice and holiness. As Jesus taught us to pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “Your Kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” It will happen. And God offers us a chance to get off the bench and join Him in this awesome work.

We are created in God’s image. Mustard seed faith says that this is a marvelous world in which God has placed us. It is an exciting and wonderful thing to be alive. We are fortunate when we can get up each morning and go to our schools, offices, fields and factories and share in the abundance of God’s creation. So take delight and be diligent in the little things. Understand the relationship between attitude and accomplishment, believing and building, daring and doing.

But there is one more essential element to mustard seed faith: God’s power and presence makes the ultimate difference in our success. Here is the critical factor in mustard seed living. We are not alone. Life can be lived in more than one dimension.

When Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God being like a tiny mustard seed, he wasn’t talking about the wonderful abilities of man. **Rather he was describing the availability of God.** It is not our abilities that establish the kingdom of God on earth. It is God’s power working through our obedience. God’s power working through our obedience establishes the kingdom of God on this earth. This is God’s world and He is involved in it.

A boy and an old man were sitting on a dock fishing one day. The boy was full of questions about why the fish act the way they do, and why the sky changes colors at sunset, and why people do the things they do. And then the boy asked, “Does anybody ever see God?”

The old man looked across the water and he smiled. He said, “Son, it’s getting so I hardly see anything else.” (4)

We hear about the Kingdom of God and we think only of some distant reality yet to manifest itself. There is that Kingdom to be sure. But there is another Kingdom, Jesus taught us, that is already here. If I may use the word guardedly, there is a “supernatural” Kingdom that already surrounds us. It is like treasure buried in a field, it is the pearl of

great price. “Lo, it is in the midst of you.” said Jesus. We are not alone in this world. Imagine the difference that makes.

Larry Jones is the founder of the international Christian aid organization, Feed the Children. Jones has received numerous awards and honors over the years for his work in feeding millions of hungry children and families around the world and in the U.S.

Larry Jones was a pastor before he founded Feed the Children. He was speaking at a church in Haiti, when a skinny little boy approached him and asked for a nickel to buy some bread. It would be the child’s only meal that day.

Larry returned to the U.S., but he couldn’t get this small boy out of his head. He knew that the U.S. had a surplus of wheat available. Instead of letting the wheat go to waste, why couldn’t it be donated to those who were hungry? Larry began speaking about his vision to transport surplus food to those in need. As Larry says, “What happened next was a miracle and a test of faith all in one.”

Farmers in Oklahoma, Larry’s home state, began sending him shipments of surplus wheat. Soon, he had over two million pounds of wheat in a storage facility. What does a pastor do with two million pounds of wheat? Here is what this pastor did. He and his wife, Frances, start an international food ministry.

As Larry would say later in an interview with author Jack Canfield, “I’ve seen it countless times in my life—when God asks you to do something, He also provides the means to achieve it. I used to try to figure out how He was going to make it all come about perfectly, but I quit doing that a long time ago . . . Frances and I have learned to simply trust that everything is exactly the way it should be. The result of this kind of faith is a deep experience of tranquility.” (5)

Once you see that this is God’s world, that God is working through ordinary people and ordinary circumstances, that God’s love is greater than any kingdom or political system or threat this world could hold, it becomes hard to see anything else. God is at work everywhere around us. God’s plan will succeed. But mustard seed faith results in action. So is God waiting on you to take the next step of faith?

1. “10 Uplifting Stories to Get You Through the Week” by Radu Alexander March, 3, 2019 <http://listverse.com/2019/03/03/10-uplifting-stories-to-get-you-through-the-week-3-3-19/>.

2. Barclay, William. *The Parables of Jesus* (The William Barclay Library) (p. 52). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

3. Dungy, Tony. *The One Year Uncommon Life Daily Challenge* (p. 21). Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. Kindle Edition.

4. C. Thomas Hilton in *Church Management*.

5. Larry Jones, *Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret*, by Dr. and Mrs. Howard Taylor cited by Jack Canfield, Gay Hendricks with Carol Kline, *You've Got to Read This Book!* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), pp. 179-182.

ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., [Dynamic Preaching Sermons](#), by King Duncan

III

We naturally carry around images in our heads, ways to think about big things. Cities have images like “The City on the Hill,” or “The Big Apple,” “Tinsel Town,” or “Most powerful capital in the world.” Teams have mascots. Dioceses have patron saints—you cannot visit Venice without seeing images of a Lion—it’s St. Mark’s icon, he is the patron of that famous port. Today people debate about the image of the United States; are we the world’s policemen, are we an empire, or are we, some suggest, even a dying empire?

The first reading from Ezekiel gives us a much-used image from ancient Israel. Trees and vines were often used as images of leadership. Isaiah sung of Israel as God’s vineyard. Ezekiel is talking about flawed leadership, how God will pluck out one plant and put in another—from the shoot of a tree a new, abundant, tree will flower. The image, then, is about judgment—how God expects certain things in accord with his love. God will wither up the green tree that is wrong, but give life to the brown one that is faithful.

Paul, in the second reading, explicitly brings up judgment. It can make us cringe. Every one of us must give an account of our lives, receiving what we deserve, in accord with the good or evil we have done. These words make our brains freeze. Do I want God looking over my life? Do I want anyone looking over my life? We believe in privacy! No one has a right to know our secret thoughts and hidden sins, we say.

So here is where the Gospel helps us. It uses part of the imagery for the first reading, but it also helps us know what our judgment will be about. Jesus compares the life of his disciples, of his Church, to images of plants. One image shows how imperceptibly faith grows, from person to person. We just have to look into our own hearts to see how faith has grown in us. Often when we least expect it. The other image is the mustard seed—how small it is, but how it grows to be a plant that gives shelter and sustenance to all. This is what Jesus wants his kingdom to be like—flowering in such a way that “all the birds of the air can come and find shade.”

Judgment will surely be about our sins, but it will be mostly about the way we helped God’s people flower, to be a haven for all those who seek refuge, a home for all those who want to draw close to God, a hand for all those who need help. Our faith is not just for us; it’s for others, and for the world, because faith is a dimension of love.

When people are in love they sing. Psalms are songs.

The author of the Ninety-second Psalm is a person who loves the church. Never is he happier than when he worships within her walls. It has been so with him all his life. Now, however, he has an additional reason for loving her. He has been on a sick bed where gloating enemies have taunted him. But God has confounded them and restored him to health. And that is not all; the Lord has called the singer's hecklers to strict account for their actions Special Moments with God

How good it is, the psalmist declares, to be able to worship again in the sacred precincts on the Sabbath! For these are special moments in which spirit with Spirit can meet. Thus, the psalmist will gratefully seek the Lord in the beauty of holiness, rejoicing in the divine presence day and night.

It is good to give thanks to the LORD,
to sing praise to your name, Most High,^a

3To proclaim your love at daybreak,

your faithfulness in the night,

4With the ten-stringed harp,
with melody upon the lyre.^b

5For you make me jubilant, LORD, by your deeds; at the works of your hands I shout for joy.

To be sure, the Almighty's ways are past understanding. But their intent is clear. And, because the singer knows this, he can trust the Lord for what lies ahead, confident that God wills only the best for those who believe. So he can bow before the Eternal in reliant adoration. Others might be struggling to find or to hold a faith, since their concern for worldly things has dulled their spiritual acumen. For the psalmist there is no such battle with doubt (Psalm 92:4, 5).

Neither is the psalmist disturbed over an issue that vexes a goodly number of his neighbors. Evildoers, they complain, flourish while the just suffer. Thus, they spend their days grumbling in discontent. Not so, the poet. Instead, like another of Israel's sweet singers, he is convinced that "the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether" (Psalm 19:9). And that being the case, he is confident that the scales will balance. God will scatter the wicked to the winds, he declares, and watch them perish. For he will never permit evil to attain the final victory (Psalm 92:9).

6How great are your works, LORD!^c How profound your designs!

7A senseless person cannot know this; a fool cannot comprehend. 8Though the wicked flourish like grass^d and all sinners thrive,

They are destined for eternal destruction; 9but you, LORD, are forever on high. 10Indeed your enemies, LORD, indeed your enemies shall perish; all sinners shall be scattered.

The Church Gives Men Roots

Comforting, indeed, is the revelation the church channels to her worshipers. The future, the psalmist exults, belongs to those who order their lives after God's will and way. For unlike the wicked, they are not like the grass, which has shallow roots and is thus quickly seared by the sun. Rather, the righteous are like the country's palm trees and her cedars of Lebanon with their deep-seated grounding (Psalm 92:9-12).

It is significant that the poet makes this dual comparison, as Alexander Maclaren once suggested. For, as he indicates, the palm tree, gracefully slender, is ever green and fruitful, while the cedar, with its broad foliage strikingly green against Lebanon's snows, stands in massive strength against the storms. So stalwart is the latter, in fact, that, as Maclaren puts it, "one cedar outlives a hundred generations of the grass and flowers that encircle its steadfast feet." So is it, the singer announces, with the righteous who are

You have given me the strength of a wild ox;^f you have poured rich oil upon me.^g
12 My eyes look with glee on my wicked enemies; my ears shall hear what happens to my
wicked foes.^h 13 The just shall flourish like the palm tree,
shall grow like a cedar of Lebanon.ⁱ 14* Planted in the house of the LORD,
they shall flourish in the courts of our God. 15 They shall bear fruit even in old age,
they will stay fresh and green,
16 To proclaim: "The LORD is just;
my rock, in whom there is no wrong."

In effect, the psalmist is saying that what is good endures, and what is evil dies. Hence, age will not wither nor custom stale the role and achievements of the righteous. For rooted and grounded in God as they are - thanks to the nurturing of the church - they will continuously tap ceaseless powers that neither time nor adversity can diminish (Psalm 92:14).

Here is no emphasis on negative goodness. Righteousness, the poet suggests, is more than restraint from wrongdoing. To tap the streams of God's grace is to assume the responsibility of showing that "the Lord is upright" (Psalm 92:15). The only way to delight in him, therefore, is to carry out God's purpose daily.

Thus, the church provides people with roots, not merely for security, but for growth. The roots must be nurtured regularly to probe deeply, however, else they will not hold before life's storms. The Scotch fir, with its massive boles and gnarled branches, gives the appearance of strength as it stands outlined against the sky. But it does not sink its roots vertically. Instead, it runs them laterally beneath the soil. As a consequence, for all its apparent sturdiness, it topples in a heavy wind. So, too, the author warns, righteousness can never be taken for granted.

Long after the psalmist's lips can no longer sing his love song to the church, the Apostle Peter sums it all up by urging the saints in his fellowship to exert every effort to continue growing in grace and the knowledge of God (2 Peter 3:18).