

The Strength of the Insignificant, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 02090614
2 Corinthians 5:6-17 and Mark 4:26-34
Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 14 June, 2009

When I was young, a long time ago, I remember my older sister wearing a necklace. It was a round sphere and looked like a clear marble. It had a little yellow mustard seed in the center of it. The mustard seed was tiny, but stark in its appearance. When I asked her about it, my sister answered in a tone that many older siblings use with their younger brothers or sisters. It was the tone of three year's additional worldly knowledge and wisdom and arrogance. "It's about mustard seed faith," she said. "Jesus said, 'If you have faith the size of a grain of mustard seed, you can move mountains.'"

Later on, I found out that Jesus talked about mustard seeds a couple of times. He is quoted in each of the three synoptic gospels. He did talk about having faith the size of a grain of mustard seed. Luke quotes Jesus saying, if you have that much faith, you can tell a mulberry tree to move and be planted in the sea, and it will obey you.¹ Matthew quotes Jesus, if you have that much faith, you can move a mountain.²

Here in Mark, Jesus is not talking about moving anything. This is one of Jesus' parables of the kingdom of God. He said, "the kingdom of God . . . is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."³ Instead of talking about the power faith can give you, he was talking about the giving that faith empowers. He was talking about what God's kingdom is like. It is here and now among you, and it is where God's compassionate love is real. The mustard seed is a small seed, yet it can grow to the point of sheltering and shading others.

The mustard bush was not a particularly welcome bush in Jesus' land and times. No one would plant the seed of a common weed. Compare it to the lowly kudzu plant. Imported from Japan in 1876, and once popular in holding back steep banks, no one anymore would plant kudzu in the southeast United States where it has no natural predators and flourishes in the warm atmosphere. The mustard plant was uncontrollable and disorderly, embodying an offense against the orderliness of Torah observance. For Jesus to use the mustard seed would have been sort of a counter-cultural message of promise and hope.

God's kingdom grows among us like a weed. It spreads out its runners and seeds. It is difficult to control, but birds can find shelter and shade among its branches. God's kingdom confounds the ordered systems of the rich and powerful. In the shelter of God's reign, the lonely and the lowly can find rest and comfort.

In our pursuit of orderliness, the popular culture cries out against "illegal" immigrants, lumping them all into one common pot. Most of us have failed to become acquainted with undocumented aliens as persons and as families, and so, we can write them off easily. Most are unaware that while many of these folks came to the United States under legal circumstances such as visa wavers, the laws were changed following 9/11/01, making many of them all of a sudden "illegal," and "undocumented." Can't we develop humane measures, honoring family values, that

¹Luke 17:6

²Matthew 17:20

³Mark 4:30-32

would allow a process for the worthy among them to become legal without their having to return to their nation and wait ten years before applying for entrance visas? I think we should support and encourage the immigration reform legislation being considered in Congress.

The kingdom of God grows among us like a weed, and just might give shelter to the lowly. In telling this parable, perhaps Jesus was reminding his listeners that God is in control, no matter how things appear. God is in control, no matter what we do or don't do. God's kingdom grows among us like a mustard bush, or like kudzu.

It is often difficult to see God's kingdom, because we see so much violence, hatred and brutality around us. We see the story of James von Brunn, an eighty-eight year old white supremacist. He shot and killed a young father, Stephen Johns, a security guard at the U. S. Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. God's kingdom was evident in the security guard's polite and kind gesture of holding the door open for the old man.

Scott Roeder chose the lobby of a Lutheran church in Wichita to shoot Dr. George Tiller to death. God's kingdom was evident in Tiller's lifelong work to provide health, safety, and voice for women in spite of earlier attempts on his life.

God's kingdom is evident in Cedar Rapids, Iowa where retired electricians and plumbers have come out of retirement to voluntarily repair more than seventy homes damaged in last year's flooding of the Cedar River. God's kingdom is evident here in Elon and Burlington, where Habitat for Humanity will dedicate a home constructed affordably by volunteers for a deserving family.

You and I are called to participate in what God is doing in the world. At times, we want to give up. The needs are so many and so great. The worldly forces of power and greed seem so overwhelming. But a tiny seed grows into the greatest of all. God can see it and God intends it.

How can you be the mustard seed today that grows and provides shelter, refuge, shade, and sustenance?

Let us pray, Mighty God, to you belong the mysteries of the universe. You transform shepherds into kings, the smallest seeds into magnificent trees, and hardened hearts into loving ones. Bless us with your life-giving Spirit, re-create us in your image, and shape us into your purposes, through Jesus Christ. Amen.⁴

⁴ Weekly Seeds, i.ucc.org, 6/8/09