

Sermon July 30, 2017 (Shared reflections with the Rev. James Koyama
and Cara B. Hochhalter)

1 Kings 3:5-12 and Matthew 13:31-33

Something as small as a tiny seed....has power! Some of you may have seen the picture I put on Facebook of a pot of marigolds we have had on our deck. There must have been some tomato seeds in the compost that Jeff potted them with...and all of a sudden we noticed that from out of a small hole at the bottom/side of the pot, was sprouting a beautiful tomato plant! Imagine that little seed...working its way down, sensing somehow that if it could just get to that little hole, it would find freedom! Perseverance! A miracle of life longing for itself!

James shared a beautiful story of Solomon whose strength was his modesty...he did not ask for power for his own benefit, but asked for wisdom, instead. Out of smallness, grew something great.

Jesus told a couple of parables about the power...of small things. Today we hear of the strength of a mustard seed...and we all know how tiny that is...and also how only a tiny portion of yeast is needed to raise up three measures of flour.

It is amazing that Jesus uses these small, seemingly insignificant things...seeds and yeast...to explain the Kingdom of God! The crowd might have been disappointed that he did not mention kings, princes, military generals or revolutionaries....his "kingdom of God" was more down to earth, literally! His "kingdom of God" was close at hand...in gardens and bread...in the ordinary places where we live and work. As a friend of my fathers used to say, "Ah, how so?"

When you think of this Realm of God, this Intention of God for this world and beyond, this power of life-giving Holiness....Why did Jesus use a mustard seed and yeast as metaphors?

I think it is about the power of love...the power of a love that can start out so small...a smile, an acceptance of someone who is hurting, a listening ear, a friendly gesture...It can start out as a concern for an issue or situation that inspires a letter or phone call or movement for justice...and Jesus asks us not to underestimate these acts of kindness and compassion....there is power in the love that comes through God... in our actions.

You have all seen it happen... giving a prayer shawl, inviting someone to something, sharing a meal, caring enough to ask what someone thinks...sharing in music together...

There is power in the smallness of love that can expand a person's heart, can enlarge the spirit of a place, and can have a ripple effect in a whole community. You know it. You see it.

I love this story because it tells me that *everyone* can be part of this realm of God...this "kingdom of Heaven"...all ages, people of all races and religions, even. Everyone can be part of this offering of compassion...and it is liberating! It doesn't take huge organizational skills, it doesn't take large endowments and investments, it doesn't take enormous institutions with by-laws and all kinds of structures. It only takes people, people who are willing to care...people, willing to show compassion for neighbors...and we draw that compassion from God.

When I made this relief print of the mustard seed parable, I had been reading an interpretation that says it is really a subversive story. When you think of the times in which Jesus lived, they were strictly controlled by the Roman Empire ... they were limited in what they could do on their own land, there were many structures that oppressed the common people.

So Jesus was asked to explain the Kingdom of God...what would it look like? And he said it was like taking a mustard seed and planting it in a garden. Now, everyone knew that you just did not plant mustard in your field...because it is invasive! It is even written in Leviticus that you must not plant mustard! It spreads and takes over!

Maybe that was Jesus' point! He turns the message upside down again when he says that the mustard will grow into a tree....mustard really doesn't grow that big...but Jesus says this plant will grow into a tree and birds will come and make nests in its branches!

What a hopeful thing...for Jesus' time and for our time. In spite of the domination and corrupt nature of ruling parties of the day...it is love, in smallness and modesty, in honesty and integrity...that will grow....and grow....and grow...until birds of all nations will come and make nests in its branches.

You have heard the expression, "Love Wins." I think this is what Jesus was telling the people around him. Like Solomon who was concerned for how he really could serve the people...out of his modesty and integrity, he was given greatness.

It is so easy to get discouraged...but we have to believe this. We have to go out and practice loving kindness. As the Buddhist monk, Matthieu Ricard said, "We have to cultivate compassion" for those around us and for our world.

Because, you see, small....does not mean wimpy. The life force in a tiny seed, is a microcosm of the universe...and how beautiful! Look at all the flowers and plants around here...think of all the life forms that are teaming in our earth and in our

waterways...and we are part of it all. Each one of us is small in relation to the billions of living beings on this earth and yet we carry within us...a piece of the Kingdom of Heaven that longs to exercise compassion and love in the world.

May it grow...in you and in me...may this Infinite Love of God...grow in our world.

Amen.