

“Sermon Seeds: Show and Tell and Taste”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Ezekiel 17:22-24

Mark 4:26-34

Today’s worship service is all about how something small can become something big.

In our Ezekiel reading, we saw-- as the PreK and Kindergarten class demonstrated-- a little sprig, the smallest bit of green growth, that came off of a lofty-- or really tall-- cedar tree. It gets planted on a high mountain, where it grows many branches, and becomes a noble cedar, under which every kind of bird will live.

I don’t know about you, but to me, this story makes a lot of sense. (Shows cedar sprig) This becomes a tree. OK. Kind of like if you look at P.J., and then look at his dad Joe. Looking from one, to the other, you think, OK, yes, I can pretty much predict what is going to happen.

On my day off on Friday, I went roller-blading along the Hudson River. The weather was perfect, and bearing all the blessings of summer. Poking along the banks of the river, I saw gaggles of geese, and tagging along with them were some young gosslings, fluffy with downy feathers that had not fully fanned out yet. I imagine it will only take until the end of the summer before these gosslings stand as tall as the adult geese, as I can see their colors are already changing from baby yellows to mature browns.

So, you see, it is easy to predict that what starts out small, will become big.

When Jesus tells us the parable of the tiniest of seed, a mustard seed, when sown into the ground, will become the greatest of all shrubs, at first glance it seems like the same sort of thing. What is small, will become big.

But there's a catch. Jesus describes the mustard seed as the smallest of all the seeds on earth. But that is not quite true. Even I can think of smaller seeds: the orchid flower makes a seed that is smaller than a mustard seed. And this morning, for breakfast, I had a poppy seed bagel (show bagel). Poppies also make seeds smaller than a mustard seed.

Was Jesus lying, or did he just not know? We don't need to be hard on Jesus. I think he was pointing out that sometimes, things seem small, so small, that everything around seems bigger. Kind of like when you look at the sky at night, and see stars stretching out across the heavens, it can make you feel really small in comparison to how big the galaxies are.

But Jesus was also letting us know that something small can be quite powerful. I am going to pass around a sampling. There are sourdough pretzels with a little mustard sauce to dip into it. Even if you don't like mustard, consider giving it a try. I always thought I didn't like mustard, because my older sister Alice told me she didn't like mustard, and she liked to figure out things before me and then tell me how the world works. So I grew up thinking I didn't like mustard. But something funny happened when I was pregnant with Kai. I tried mustard, and realized that I really like mustard! It is bitter and tart, sweet, spicy and tangy, all at the same time. The taste has power.

Mustard's power does not only come from its taste; it also has medicinal properties. Pliny the Elder, a Roman philosopher who lived the same time as Jesus, stated that mustard cures "snake and scorpion bites, toothache, indigestion, asthma, epilepsy, constipation, dropsy, lethargy, tetanus, leprous sores, and other illnesses."<sup>1</sup> (Please do not use my sermon for official medical advice.)

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc 2016 p. 177

So we can see how something small can be quite powerful: powerful in taste, and powerful in healing. But big? Have you ever seen a mustard plant? Jesus describes it as the greatest of shrubs, with large branches into which the birds of the air can make nests in its shade. It is as if the little mustard seed Jesus describes could become like the tall, noble cedar tree that Leo read about in Ezekiel.

(Shows mustard plant). How many birds could live in this plant? At best, a mustard plant can grow into a tall weed which the birds might visit for a few seconds. But unless I am missing something, mustard plants are hardly big or strong enough to hold a nest. There is no early way

Here is the point when we need to remember that Jesus is not talking about ordinary things. Or, more correctly, he *IS* talking about ordinary things, to tell us about how extraordinary God is. And God can take ordinary things, and make them extraordinary. So, the kingdom of God is like a little seed that becomes a great big shrub that isn't really like a shrub at all but like the tallest, noblest cedar tree.

What other ordinary things does God make extraordinary? Water-- normal, everyday water that we eat, drink, wash with, swim in... becomes extraordinary when it becomes the waters of our baptism.

Bread and juice, ordinary things that we chew on and sip, that we taste and swallow, from the grain and the grape of the earth-- these things become extraordinary when we have communion and remember the body of Jesus with us.

You all know that our Sunday School children will grow big. Some of you children may have even grown taller while I was preaching this sermon! But sometimes you might wonder if you will become extraordinary. Sometimes, in fact, you may even feel quite small. But when God's life takes root in you, extraordinary things can grow.

We have to remember this when we look at our children. And not only the children that come into these walls; looking at children who have crossed borders to find safer living in this country, and get detained and separated from their parents. We must remember that they are not insignificant seeds; instead, in these tiny travelers we must see the potential for the blossoming kingdom of God.

I want to end with another story about travelers. It is The Story of Stone Soup.

*Some travelers come to a village, carrying nothing more than an empty cooking pot. Upon their arrival, the villagers are unwilling to share any of their food stores with the hungry travelers. Then the travelers go to a stream and fill the pot with water, drop a large stone in it, and place it over a fire. One of the villagers becomes curious and asks what they are doing. The travelers answer that they are making "stone soup", which tastes wonderful and which they would be delighted to share with the villager, although it still needs a little bit of garnish, which they are missing, to improve the flavor.*

*The villager, who anticipates enjoying a share of the soup, does not mind parting with a few carrots, so these are added to the soup. Another villager walks by, inquiring about the pot, and the travelers again mention their stone soup which has not yet reached its full potential. The villager hands them a little bit of seasoning. More and more villagers walk by, each adding another ingredient. Finally, the stone (being inedible) is removed from the pot, and a delicious and nourishing pot of soup is enjoyed by travelers and villagers alike.*

By God's power, a stone is not just a stone. A seed is not just a seed. You are not just a kid, or whatever you stepped into this sanctuary as. In you, the kingdom of God might bloom. Have fun discovering how you might grow into that one. Amen.

