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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

June 16, 2024

Proper 6, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary

[1 Samuel 15:34-16:13](#)

[Psalm 20](#)

[2 Corinthians 5:6-10,\[11-13\],14-17](#)

[Mark 4:26-34](#)

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David wasn't the king Samuel was expecting to anoint that day. He wasn't the obvious draft pick. He was the youngest of eight, so unimpressive compared to his older brothers that his father Jesse didn't even bring him along to the meeting with Samuel but left him out watching the sheep. But God chose him. From modest expectations, greatness.

"The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows it becomes the greatest of all shrubs so the birds can make nests in its shade."

Jesus could have told this parable about a towering cedar of Lebanon, the giant trees of his region, the kind of tree the Temple was built out of. In fact that line about the birds of the air making nests in its shade is taken straight out of a passage from the Old Testament, from Ezekiel, that *is* about a cedar tree.

But he chose to tell it about a mustard bush, a plant that grows medium-size at best, with that wonderful line, one of my favorite in all of scripture, “the greatest of all shrubs.” From modest expectations, greatness. “God has chosen the little things in the world to put the big to shame, and the foolish to put the wise to shame,” St. Paul says in another place, and very often littleness and hiddenness are God’s way of working.

I think there’s something about this mustard-seed power that speaks to us in our life of faith. Part of it is a trust in small, steady faithfulness that’s one of the gifts of our Anglican/Episcopal tradition. At its best, the Anglican way of being Christian doesn’t rely just on miracles or spectacular faith experiences, although those may come from time to time. Instead this tradition tends to put a lot of emphasis on daily prayers, weekly prayer, the sacraments, everyday life in community, and everyday acts of love and service. It’s like the farmer in Jesus’ first parable from today, who does the work of sowing and then sleeps and rises in trust. It’s like the long-term, everyday work of life in a family, a household, or indeed a parish community—treating each other with grace, forgiveness, humor, and joy; making decisions about how to order our finances, our use of resources, our care for creation.

Today of course is Father’s Day. And there are those for whom this day is deeply meaningful and who will celebrate it in all kinds of ways, and there are those for whom this day is hard for any number of reasons. But fatherhood at its best, and parenthood at its best, is very much about the everyday work of faithfulness, of showing up, of unglamorous but loving faithfulness, the life of the mustard seed.

In our church's life we're into a quieter season now as we move into summer. We've been through the great feasts of Easter and Pentecost and Trinity Sunday, and now we're in that long season after Pentecost sometimes called the "green, growing season." We've celebrated Pride Weekend and our choirs and musicians, and many of our church programs and classes are taking a well-deserved break. So it's good for us to reflect on how often God works in the small stuff; behind the scenes; under the radar.

My colleague Josh Thomas is an Episcopal priest and the executive director of a nonprofit organization called Seeds for Peace. For the past thirty years, they have been bringing Palestinian and Israeli teenagers together to go to a summer camp in Maine. For most it's the first time they've ever spent interacting with kids their own age from the other group. Together they play sports, go canoeing, sing campfire songs, and do all the regular summer camp things—plus spend time in small group conversations getting to know each other's cultures, histories, and perspectives. They go home with friends from the other side of the wall and stay in touch with WhatsApp chats and Facetime. Today there are more than 8000 Seeds for Peace alumni, many now in leadership positions, serving in government, in nonprofits, in education, in activism. Now Seeds for Peace didn't stop the October 7 attacks or the war that followed. And in the face of that war a little project like sending kids to summer camp together might seem insignificant. But God chose David, out there tending the sheep, to be king. Jesus chose the mustard plant, the greatest of all shrubs, to be a symbol of the kingdom. And when God brings peace and justice to Palestine and Israel, who's to say it won't be in part through a camp song or a WhatsApp chat that paves the way for seeing one another's humanity?

One Friday in Passover week in the first century, while city life bustled, while people observed the Passover festival, while Tiberius Caesar ruled in Rome and Pontius Pilate ruled in Judea, outside the city walls one criminal among many was executed on a hillside outside Jerusalem. Three days later, a band of confused followers had a strange, hard-to-understand experience that changed them forever—while the world outside sat around completely unaware.

From the beginning, Christians have been perverse enough to take those events and see in them the centerpoint of human and cosmic existence, the most significant act of God's power once and for all. As empires rise, sheltering the nations in their branches; as presidents change the world with political power, as generals transform it with military strength, as tycoons shape it with financial power, even as evangelists and bishops transform it with religious authority—as the kingdoms of the world go around building their empires, the kingdom of God is quietly, gently, but insistently growing into the greatest of all shrubs.

And as those empires topple, like all tall cedars of Lebanon eventually do, the kingdom of God keeps working its mysterious power.

In a world dominated by big events and big crises, we may not always be sure our own lives make a difference. Today our mustard-seed God calls us to see the kingdom growing, taking shape, bearing fruit, even in the places we might not be looking.

Where is that hidden power of God at work in your life today