

Sermon: In Need of a Mustard Seed**Scripture: Mark 4:26-41****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: June 17, 2018**

So we've baptized the little mustard seed of Lillian Miriam Pulaski this morning and it will be beautiful to see how her life, stretched between the Jewish and Christian traditions will be used by God. Tracy and I have raised our own children stretched between the Protestant and Catholic traditions and I remember a spiritual teacher of mine Rabbi Michael Shevack who married a Christian woman saying at one point – while we are all squabbling and killing each other over differences of theology and religion, God is breeding the problem away with babies who due to their parents are both Jewish and Christian, both Protestant and Catholic. Jesus was Jewish not Christian. He was not Protestant nor Catholic and it's crystal clear in the Gospels that Jesus was not about adherence to a particular religion or set of beliefs but about the living breathing dynamic relationship with the Divine, our heavenly parent. If anything, the calcification of religious belief, and claiming some were in and others were out, was what Jesus challenged any chance he got.

When Jesus was asked by his disciples “tell us about the Kingdom of Heaven”, his teaching never goes otherworldly, as though the kingdom is a reward place at the end of life, rather time and time again he gets more earthy and immanent, it's about right here and right now. What is the kingdom of God like, it's like a woman who has a loaf of bread. It's like a shepherd who has lost a sheep. It's like a farmer

spreading seed. It's right here and right now. It's like a mustard seed, the least of all seeds, and when it grows it becomes a great shrub and gives shade so the birds of the air can make nests. Yeah, that's what the Kingdom of Heaven is like.

Far from fluffy white clouds and singing harps and pearly gates for the privileged few, Jesus uses the image of the mustard seed and bush, which to a first century Mediterranean ear, especially to farmers and harvesters, would be an abrasive image, cause the mustard shrub was not something you would ever want in a garden but it was more like a weed that you'd want to eradicate. And even the image of the shrub being a shaded place for the birds of the air, sounds all sweet until you go back to the previous parable in the Gospel of Mark to where the sower of seed is spreading seed on rocky, shallow, or good soil, and the birds are not a welcomed presence. They come when the seed is spread on the hard earth and eat it all up! So then for Jesus to immediately follow that parable with one that speaks of the Kingdom of Heaven being like a shrub to house those troublesome birds... we are not meant to get a warm fuzzy feeling. It's meant to be troubling – The Kingdom of Heaven is like mustard plant taking over our neatly designed garden rows and giving nest to un-desire-able birds!

And wouldn't that be just like Jesus, rather than confirming our prejudices and preferences, instead to challenge us to move beyond them, and wouldn't it just be something that his church, the outposts of the kingdom, would be the one place where the divisions and separations and discriminations of our sinful world are broken down? But if you look around the churches in our country at least, I'm afraid

that is not how the church operates rather it reflects the lines of separation and demarcation that are rampant in our culture. Most of our churches are divided along racial lines. Most of our churches are either liberal where conservatives feel not so welcomed or conservative where liberals feel out of place. Most of our churches are either of the wealthy and privileged set or of the blue-collar working class set. The reason there is a First Congregational Church in Winchester AND a Second Congregational, so I've heard it said, is because the factory owners and the factory workers had trouble being church together and worshipping God together. Pick any town and the reason there are multiple Christian churches is because we separate and gather with people who look and think and act for the most part like we do and then what happens next, we see ourselves as the in-group and others as the out group and conveniently our in-group is the right one, the ones that are going to heaven, the ones favored by God.

The irony of this taking place in the church of all places is deep as it's so contrary to what Jesus taught and what He apparently wanted. The Kingdom of Heaven is quite clearly not a wall that keeps us in and "them" out. It is like a shrub that grows across all boundaries and through all effort to contain and maintain. The Kingdom of Heaven is quite clearly not like a gated community for wealthy people who have the money to pay. Jesus said it was like a sprawling shrub that accommodates the troubling birds. The Kingdom of Heaven is not like one nation under capitalism where the rich who claim to be the harder working get richer while the poor who are labeled as lazy get poorer. It

is like a growing organic mess of a plant that disrupts our neat garden rows and our tidy intention for things.

At least that's what Jesus said, that's how Jesus spoke and taught, and given that the church is supposed to be founded by Him and inspired by Him and directed to Him, I think we have to assume that the church is failing Him in so far as we keep separate from and feel superior to those who think and look and act differently than we do.

How did people recognize Christians in the early years? By their crazy boundary-less communities of love where Roman citizens and Jews and rich and poor and insiders and outsiders, devoutly religious and barely religious all came together into one big family under the name of Jesus and in love with God. It actually wasn't all that pretty! It was messy as Paul's letters attest to and yet, they all together had this common bond in Jesus and this Jesus expected and required them to do the hard work of love across all those boundaries of separation.

"If you love those who love you, what credit is it to you." Jesus says. "So what if you do good to those who do good to you? If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive? What credit is that to you? Sinners do that. What I say to you is love your enemies and do good and lend expecting nothing in return and then you will be sons and daughters of the Most High!" That's the nature and quality of the Kingdom of God and should be the nature and quality of God's church. All the lines we draw to separate ourselves out and the judgments we level against one another and the artificial boundaries we build to keep us in and others out, it's all anti-Kingdom, anti-Christ, and reading a parable like the mustard seed should pull us up short, should at least

tweak if not jolt our guilty conscience as we look around and say “wait a minute, what’s wrong with this picture.”

And when we have a Jew and a Christian standing here baptizing their baby without dismissing one tradition and privileging the other, we should celebrate the glimpse we are getting right there into the Kingdom of God. How Kerri and Ben raise Lillian and whatever other children they have within both traditions might be quite messy at times but that is the very nature of the kingdom of God which is like a messy sprawling mustard shrub which simply cannot be contained by the neat categories we try to carve out in this world. And for that we ought to give thanks and ask for courage and be humble... and let us keep baptizing these little mustard seeds cause their what we need!