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Sermon: Seeds of Change

In early 2006 my world turned dark. In a span of 3 days, a good friend of mine lost his father to cancer, another very close friend lost her brother to suicide, and I received the phone call that my youth pastor & mentor had been killed.

Not that I didn't know that my mentor's death was a possibility. He had mentored me throughout high school and served as a kind of surrogate father to me. After I graduated from high school, the same year as my mentor's son, Tom left his work as a youth pastor and joined Christian Peacemaker Teams. He participated in direct non-violent actions in Palestine and Israel and then documented human rights abuses in the prisons in Baghdad. Less than 4 months prior to this particular week, Tom and three others had been kidnapped, most likely due to their work recording stories of those imprisoned and the conditions therein. On March 9th, 2006 the other three captives were released, and Tom's body was found.

It was a grim time for me. My most solid beliefs were challenged, grief took hold in the forms of deep anger and lament, and while I had been a leader among my youth community, I did not have the capacity to hold their grief along with my own. When I received that phone call in early 2006, I had just gotten out of class and sank in tears into the stairs on which I was walking. Friends and professors surrounded me and we found a space in the common area to hold silence, to pray, and to tell stories.

A little while later a friend of mine came by our circle with a small bundle in her hands. She placed the bundle next to me, gave me a hug and left. After some time friends and professors and others drifted back to their normal day and I had a few moments alone before I headed home. I opened up this little bundle and found that it contained a candle, and a handful of grape hyacinth bulbs. Inside was also a small hand-written note that simply said "when everything around you appears to be dying, nurture something into life."

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So I did just that. I planted those bulbs in a small amount of soil and each day I watered them. I watched their small green shoots become stems. I watched buds begin to flower and I inhaled the rich perfume of those beautiful blossoms. Eventually I watched as the flowers and the plants died. For weeks I continued to watch as the stalks and flowers withered and the plants shrank back into their bulbs. One day I planted the bulbs along side a path at my college hoping they would come up again, this time for someone else. The season of my grief was reflected in the lifecycle of those flowers.

But grief, as grief does, is never a linear path, and the cycles of this particular grief over the years was joined by others. Again and again, I found myself among plants, among soil, and among life. In 2009, at the end of a significant personal relationship, I moved to my cousin's farm in southwest Virginia, once again seeking in my grief to nurture something into life. This time

though the whole garden was my therapist. I watered the plants with my tears and I screamed into the pits I dug for irrigation. It was a safe place to let it all out. For you see in the intervening three years, I had walked away from my faith, my community, my beliefs, and my heart. And as I was coming home to who I was, that authentic self, it hurt. It hurt a lot. And so I poured those emotions, those memories, the grief and pain in that garden. Months later, when I was finishing up the harvest, getting ready to transition to attend seminary actually, I held a handful of beans and wondered. Do each of these beans contain a tiny grain of my pain? of my sadness? Of my heart?

Maybe... and maybe they also contained the promise of new life. Maybe they contained tiny grains of sunshine and of rain, of wind and lightning bugs, of the moments in-between the grief when laughter and joy shone through. In the fact the whole garden, in its flourishing harvest and impending death and dormancy, contained tiny grains of every spirit and soul that graced its space. And with every spirit and soul came stories, and with every story came emotions, and with every emotion came God. For God is in the infinitesimal, the tiniest of tiniest, God is in the infinite, grandest of grandest, and God is in the space between.

The story of the mustard seed, told by Jesus in the passage from Matthew that was read, is a story of the infinitesimal, a story of the infinite and a story of the in-between. It's actually a parable that is told in 3 out of the four gospels, and a metaphor that Jesus uses to show how great things can come from the tiniest places. "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which someone took and planted in their field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, when it grows, it is the largest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches."

The historical and cultural context of Jesus' followers would have expanded this simple teaching and filled in the in-between. First, the mustard seed that is being talked about is not the culinary mustard seed that many of you have in your kitchens. This is a wild mustard seed, a seed that is packed with thousands of others into a pod. When you open the pod, like dust the seeds release, scattering everywhere. Second, the idea that someone would intentionally plant this wild seed is peculiar. Wild mustard, while it can be used to flavor foods like its domesticated relative, would have been planted more specifically to house wildlife, like the birds that Jesus mentions, making this someone who planted the seed more of a conservationist than a farmer. As God uses even the least of us to do great things, how do we make space to nurture and house the hearts and souls of others? Who are the birds in our trees? Where can they build their nests? I wonder?

And lastly the biology of the seed itself holds messages in-between its birth and full growth for us to ponder, for as we liken this mustard seed to ourselves, pondering what God has in store of the even the least of us, what did that tiny mustard seed need to grow into the enormous bush and tree? what did that tiny mustard seed need to survive? What do we need to go from seed to tree?

For one, that tiniest of tiniest seeds needed roots. Last week I spoke of nurturing and developing good soil for the seeds to grow in, and that mustard seed is no exception, it too needs good soil. For from the tiny world inside the seed, first roots grow. Rooted in community, in inspiration, rooted in faith and rooted in love, rooted in a soil that provides rich nutrients and living water, that seed developed strong roots from which to grow. When each of you looks at the work that

God is calling you to do in the world, where are your roots? Are you rooted in a sense of place? A sense of community? A sense of faith and love? Close your eyes for a moment and feel the roots of your heart, what are you rooted in?

As that tiniest of tiniest seed sprouted, and poked its little sprout out of the soil, without doubt it saw a treacherous and frightful world, not unlike our own today. And as it grew, it experienced rain and wind, sun and dry spells, hail, maybe even snow, cyclones, and quakes. For those of you gardeners out there, you know that start seeds inside, you know that sometimes those tender sprouts need a fan blowing on them so that they form thick bendable stems. To create resiliency, plants adapt to the conditions around them. For this tiniest of tiniest seed to grow from a microscopic sprout into a tree, it had to endure, it had to adapt, it had to change, and by changing it changed the world around it. “Adaptation is the physical attributes and positive attitude that helps something live.” A friend of mine wrote that in a poem, “Adaptation is the physical attributes and positive attitude that helps something live.” When everything around you is dying, how do you adapt to nurture something into life?

And then of course there are the other dangers, animals eating the plant, pests & insects, blight, illness, people stomping on the plant, floods, droughts, construction, climate change, war, strife... and yet the seed grew. It grew and it grew and it grew. That seed adapted, it developed resiliency, it may have at some point been pruned—intentionally or unintentionally and yet it grew beyond expectation, it grew larger than any other mustard seed had ever grown and it changed people’s minds to what was possible. Too often when we read this parable, we think of a careful cultivated plant free from the experiences of all challenge. Here though was a fiercely wild plant, yes, planted in good soil, but left to the challenge of growth and survival. Here is the tiniest mustard seed that grew and grew and grew, and grew into a tree.

Later in the chapter of Matthew, Jesus says to his disciples “Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.” (17:20). The repetition of the metaphor of the mustard seed affirms that Jesus is teaching his disciples that anyone is capable of being used by God to do great things. However, like the parable of the mustard seed earlier in the book of Matthew, Jesus leaves out the in-between. Jesus never says that being used by God to do great things will be easy, will be immediate, or won’t change you—his own life being case and point. Yet as we unpack these parables we find both hope that the impossible is possible, and also the call to do that hard work, to adapt, to change, to survive the challenges to grow. That tiny seed that grows into something new, the seed that changes and changes the world around it, The tiny seed that in its growth defies all expectations and brings about something new in the collective imagination of the people around us.

In college, I attended classes with students who had spent summers at a camp in Maine, called Seeds of Peace. It is a program where teenagers from families on different sides of conflicts spend time living and learning together. Jewish Israeli’s room with Muslim or Christian Palestinians, kids from divided Cyprus, Greece and Turkey live alongside each other, teens different political communities in India, Pakistan, Somali, the Balkans and Afghanistan play soccer together and wash dishes together. The program now even brings together kids from divided parts of the US, from communities divided by religion, race, and ethnicity. The goal of

the program is to challenge the collective imagination of communities, to show that the tiniest seeds can grow into trees. Ripples of this program extend back to home committees as the teenagers engage in local community building activities and then reach further as they often attend college together and become professionals in the world, spreading a story of a different way, living a story of friendship, and planting new seeds of change as they grow and live. Just a summer camp in Maine, a few hours from here. A tiny seed... just a holding sign on a road side. A tiny seed... just being kind to a stranger. Just a tiny seed...

When pondering this sermon, I found myself thinking about Margaret Mead's quote "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." I thought, wow, that quote is overused and maybe its even lost meaning now in today's political and social climate. And as I put together this sermon, the quote kept coming up again and again, until I realized that in every single place that I've traveled that has honored the suffering and memorialized the horror of genocide: Holocaust museums in New York, D.C, and Jerusalem, and genocide memorials in Rwanda, and Kurdistan... its that quote that is written somewhere on the wall. Sure, "Never Forget" is also a repeated theme, that's what these places are built to do, that is keep us from forgetting the past, but "Never Doubt", never doubt that we can make a difference, never doubt we can change our future, that's the seed, the one with roots, the one with tiny grains of pain, grief, thousands of stories and pieces of wisdom. A seed that contains all the genetic information to become its authentic self. A seed that awakens in the spring and brings forth new life. A seed that changes, adapts, grows resilient, and in living and becoming changes the world around it. You are like a mustard seed, a tiny embodiment of the Kingdom of God, holding everything needed to bring that kingdom about. What work is in store for you to grow into the tree that everyone thinks is impossible? Into the tree where God resides in each tiny cell, in the infinitesimal of your faith and being; all the way through to the infinite that is the expanding imagination.