

“The Gift Inside All of Us”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
August 18, 2013

Matthew 13: 31-33

One of the things I've always appreciated about this church is the care and attention it takes to how hospitable the building and grounds are to guests and visitors. That begins with the flowers, trees, and landscaping which surrounds our property. (1) And I can't tell you how impressed I've been with the new peace garden which was created during the time of renewal. It has only added to the welcoming nature you show to our community, and I have appreciated it as a place to stop, sit, and breath amid the daily routine of work.

(2) Several years ago, the landscape team recognized that the area around the church's south entrance was in need of revitalization. And they did a wonderful job of adding new flowers and shrubs on either side of the main entrance. (3) One kind of shrub we planted was an oak leaf hydrangea. They are large, full plants that turn a beautiful orange-red in the fall. They have been a great addition and valuable investment in our landscaping.

(4) Last year, though, something strange happened to one of the plants. For no explainable reason, it just started to wither and die. We couldn't tell whether it had a disease or fungus, but it just died. What was interesting, though, was while the main plant was dying, all along its base were these little sprigs and shoots of new plants. It was a great juxtaposition: as one great plant was losing its life, it was giving birth to many springs of new life.

Some of us dug up the new shoots from the oak leaf hydrangea. Marcia Brock was kind enough to dig up one for me so I could plant it at my house. In typical fashion, I was negligent in getting it into the ground right away. (5) Nevertheless, I went ahead and planted it at our house, watered it, and decided to wait and see how it might do. This year, it has grown a good deal from that little sapling. Out of a small seedling, a new bush begins to grow.

That's one of the mysteries of nature: we plant something small, like a seed, and through processes which we are unable to see on the outside, this tiny object changes into something different and new. A small pinecone can turn into a large evergreen tree, and while we witness changes on the exterior, it is the mystery of what is happening on the interior that baffle and amaze us.

In two parables, Jesus speaks of the kingdom today in ways that are mysterious and transformative. We immediately think of something small turning into something large when we hear about the mustard seed and the yeast. And yet there is also something mysterious, hidden, even subversive, about these images, and how God acts in unexpected ways to bring about the kingdom of heaven. For it is the hidden and mysterious gift of faith that germinates inside each of us, seeking to bloom into God's abundant kingdom.

(6) To begin, Jesus first says the kingdom “is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches” (13:31-32). Jesus uses another analogy from farming, as

he had with the parable of the sower (13:1-9). This time, he uses the smallest of visible things in nature, a mustard seed, which in its first appearance seems insignificant and puny. But given time, faithfulness, patience, and nourishment, it becomes a great bush.

(7) Next, Jesus says that the kingdom “is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened” (13:33). A more accurate translation of this verse from the Greek would change the meaning just a bit: instead of “mixed in with”, the Greek verb actually means “to hide.” The kingdom is like something hidden deep inside, which we cannot see at work. And for Jesus’ audience, yeast was not considered a positive ingredient, for the Jewish diet consisted of unleavened bread. But in his story, that very unruly yeast is actually what causes tremendous growth: mixed with three measures of flour the yeast would have produced enough bread to feed 100-150 people (New International Bible).

(6) Actually, in much the same way that yeast is hidden within the dough to help it grow and rise, the mustard seed has similar qualities. Ted Wardlaw writes: “Almost weightless and growing into weeds that sprout up wild, they would not often have been deliberately sown in the neat rows of a farmer’s field . . . Mustard seeds – lying undetected in a big sack of some other kind of seed – are finally thrown onto the waiting soil in the same handful as that other, more dominant seed; no one suspects for an instant that any plant other than the one that is planted will sprout and grow up. At the end of the day, as it germinates and sprouts and grows, its final result radically reorients what is expected.

“(This likely would have shocked the disciples hearing Jesus), who would assume that the planting and cultivation of such a kingdom is more orderly and predictable, laid out in neat rows. The kingdom of heaven is like soybeans, or like beautiful rows of lavender or cotton or grapes. What goes in is planned, and is altogether similar to what grows up.

“However, when the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, maybe that suggests that nicely bounded rows of expected crops are forever being invaded and overturned by an in-breaking that is finally unexpected. More often than not, we want to draw clear, unarguable boundaries around the kingdom of heaven. It is fair to have doubts, fair to explore what we believe and what we have trouble believing; but it is not fair for us to gather on Sunday and say, ‘Jesus Christ is Lord!’ while at the same time behaving as if Jesus were dispensable – just a nice guy living in the first century who went about doing good” (Ted Wardlaw, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2011: 285-287).

I believe that is why we struggle sometimes in the church, and why some people eventually leave the church. Often we believe that we are sowing specific seeds for starting a new program, and have specific expectations of how those seeds will sprout into flourishing ministries. Or we come into church with our past history and expectations of what works and doesn’t work, and we measure success and failure in the present by those past experiences and histories.

And then a mustard seed starts to sprout in the midst of what we planted. It might be a totally different group of people who show up than we had planned. It might be people giving financially to a project we don’t really align ourselves with. It might be using the facility for ministry in ways we never thought possible. Whatever the case, the mustard seed grows, and it’s hard to accept it amid our expectations of

neat rows of cultivated crops. For some, this is too challenging to accept, and they leave looking for neater, more predictable crops.

As we mentioned earlier in the worship service, Archbishop Desmond Tutu will be in Indianapolis in September to give a free, public address. In the early 1980s, in the midst of apartheid in South Africa, he made an interesting statement. He said: "When the white people arrived, we had the land and they had the Bible. They said, 'Let us pray.' When we opened our eyes, they had the land and we had the Bible. And we got the better of the deal."

"The kingdom of heaven, like the mustard seed, invades the cultivated soil of our certainties and our boundaries and creates out of it all something new - 'the better of the deal.' Hidden within what we think we see so clearly, it is subversive and grows up in unexpected ways until what we thought we knew is transformed and redeemed by our surprising, invasive God" (ibid, page 289).

As I have spoken with person after person about what the renewal time was like at John Knox, many have commented about the ideas and projects and experiences which bubbled up and sprouted during this time. I mentioned earlier the peace garden as one example of this. (8) But I also have heard many, many times people commenting on how meaningful the prayer wall has been. It has been a place for old and young, member and visitor, friend and stranger to gather, write, and pray for one another and the specific prayers left on the wall. (9) I heard one individual comment that the prayer wall has caused them to feel more connected with the entire congregation than at any other time in the past. Others have said how spiritually connected and welcoming it has been for our community who come for activities and events throughout the week. It is a small, simple idea, which invades - in a positive way - and germinates our understanding of God's kingdom here and now.

And yet that hidden mystery of the yeast and the mustard seed are inside us all, and there are always opportunities to let God work the mystery into a transformative reality. (10) In three weeks, we will have Invite-a-Friend Sunday at John Knox, with one service and a catered luncheon following worship. I would invite you to try something today in preparation for that event.

In your bulletins, we always list our prayer requests each week. Turn to that section in your bulletin. You will notice that at the end of the list we have inserted a few blank lines. My invitation to you today is to prayerfully consider one or two individuals you might invite to worship on September 8. A neighbor, a co-worker, a friend, a family member. Whoever it might be, write their name down on those lines and take this home with you. Leave it on your nightstand or in your car or on the kitchen counter - somewhere where you see it on a regular basis. And pray. Pray for insight, pray for courage, pray for the time to speak, and pray for peace. Pray for the gift inside you to germinate and grow, so that the harvest might be plentiful and abundant. And know that with God all things are possible.

"Let those with ears listen." Thanks be to God. Amen.

(Numbers in parentheses correspond to pictures shown below.)



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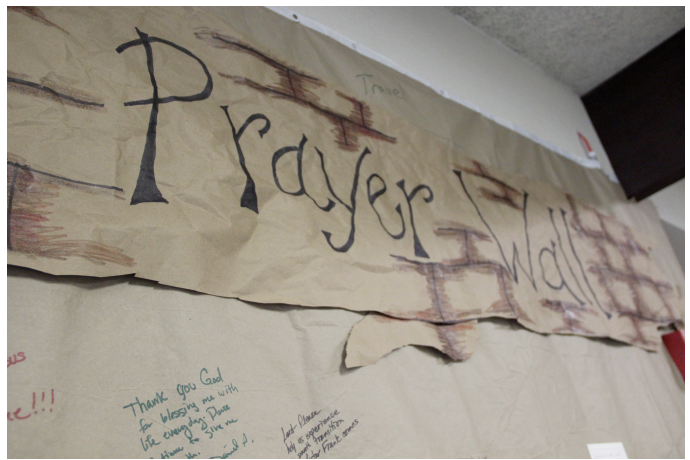
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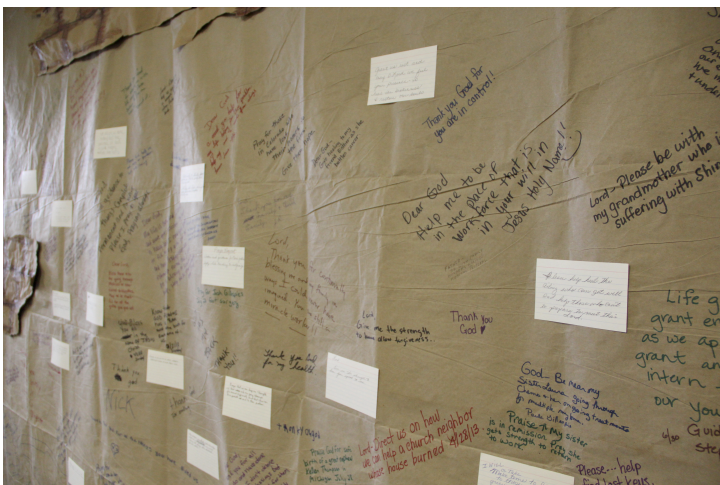
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