

# *“The Rippling Kingdom”*

*Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 12*

*Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52*

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From the Pulpit

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*Prayer for Illumination: Almighty God, in you are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Open our eyes that we may see the wonders of your Word; and give us grace that we may clearly understand and freely choose the way of your wisdom; through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

I must have come home from Vacation Bible School with a smile on my face having learned the story of the mustard seed. Oh, that little seed! The Dixie cup full of dirt. Our teacher carefully placed the wee little seed in my hand for me to push it into the soil. She said, “The mustard seed is the tiniest of seeds but it grows into something big and beautiful for God. You too can grow like a mustard seed, big and strong and faithful.” I remember pushing the little mustard seed into the soil with the tip of a pencil and covering it over. I took it home with such pride. “Look Mom, let’s watch the mustard seed grow.”

As you may remember, I don’t have a very good history tending plants. I don’t have a green thumb and I learned it early in life. As for that little mustard seed, let’s just say it didn’t have a chance.

If you have had enough wandering in the weedy, thorny, dirty, and seedy parables of the Matthew’s Gospel Chapter 13, you

are not alone. I have a colleague who insists on not preaching another parable from Matthew for at least three years. This morning, I am suggesting that this gospel parable is another preposterous seed story.

Here's why. The parable has been used to encourage the faithful in their faith journey, and their growing in Christian discipleship. Jesus offers encouragement as the disciples go out to make more disciples of all nations. Words like this tend to be associated with a parable like ours today, "First, if you don't succeed; try, try again." "Hang in there don't give up." "You can do it, have faith." "You just don't know when something you say will sink in and take root in someone's life." It's like the pep talk, the pre-game hype session.

Except, I'm not sure that's what Jesus means at all. This interpretation of the passage is based on a misunderstanding about the mustard seed. That cute little mustard seed that can grow into something big and beautiful for God IS an invasive species. That mustard plant grows entirely wild. Once a mustard seed is sown, it is darn near impossible to get the place free of it. This is a parable about a malignant weed. It can't be controlled. They are stubborn and refuse to be confined to their assigned areas. Once you get it going—it's quickly out of control.

A mustard seed plant doesn't seem holy enough to be in the same category of the kingdom of heaven. The mustard plant is more like a shrub, a mighty shrub, as wide as it is tall. There doesn't seem to be anything exciting or incredible about a shrub. They are ordinary, they are close to the ground, close to the dirt and bugs.

Not only does Jesus tell the preposterous seed story, he shares another parable. This time of a woman who mixed some leaven into some flour. The woman mixes the yeast in enough flour to feed a hundred people. Yeast here is translated as leaven and leaven isn't a positive word in the first century. Unleavened bread was holy. Yeast was a contaminant, so to speak. This woman not just mixes the yeast into the flour, she hides it.

By the time she hides all the yeast in the flour, and all of the flour was leavened—all of it was corrupt. In the first century, you made leaven bread by storing it in a damp, dark place until mold formed.<sup>1</sup>

Wait, when God is in charge the world it looks like a shrub and like mold?

Not only that, but Jesus is relentless in his story telling. I am sure by the end of the day, having listened to so many parables

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<sup>1</sup> Scott, *Hear then the Parable* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1989), 374.

about weeds and seeds and yeast and things hidden, like, treasures, pearls and fishing nets that the disciples' heads were spinning. When Jesus takes a breath and asks if the disciples understand, they probably say, "Yes!" just to make him stop.

Why would Jesus use a pernicious weed and a pollutant to describe what the world looks like when God is in charge? Because both have this way of spreading beyond anything you'd imagined, infiltrating a system and taking over. Might God's kingdom (God's work in the world) be like that—far more potent than we'd imagine and ready to spread over every corner of our lives?<sup>2</sup>

Jesus offers these parables because God reframes what we think is holy and what is not? No matter how moldy or rotten something is, God can use it for the sake of God's world.

In 2015, Derrick Weston, assistant program manager of the 29<sup>th</sup> Street Community Center in Baltimore, Maryland, led a group of high school students to an abandoned park in Harwood, a predominantly African American neighborhood, where they picked up trash, repaired fences, and converted bookcases into raised gardening beds. They build up soil, dug holes and carefully planted impatiens and coleus.

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<sup>2</sup> [www.davidlose.net](http://www.davidlose.net), 2014.

Some days the kids became frustrated, because the broken bottles, syringes, and wrappers that they had picked up seemed to reappear. They felt that their work was being disrespected. They thought their work wasn't making a difference. But they persisted. They didn't give up and they didn't give in.

On his blog Weston writes, "Planting flowers goes against a culture of death and violence. It pushes back against the corrosive effect of much of everyday life." The team pursued beauty in the midst of neglect. They worked to see a different picture; to write a different story for themselves and for the neighborhood. Weston became aware of God's kingdom on that small patch of land. He says, "Because the kingdom of God is like yeast or a mustard seed or some other small thing that has rippling effects, perhaps our small actions will surprise us with exponential goodness."<sup>3</sup>

I think that is what God is up to in this world—exponential goodness. God is at work in the world through small gestures of love and justice and mercy. God opens the hearts and minds of those who are curious and imperfect to see others not as strangers but as neighbors. God works in those who doubt and those who are stubborn to show us a glimpse of the breadth and depth of God's love for the creation. Jesus

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<sup>3</sup> Carol Howard Merritt, *The Christian Century*, 11/30/2015. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2015-11/knee-deep-renewal>

reminds us just how uncontrollable the grace of God is for you, for me, for all of us. When God is in charge things we least expect will surprise us, like Weston says, with “exponential goodness.”

If you are unsure of what that image of God-at-work in the world looks like. If you can't paint a picture of a world where God is full of surprises, I share with you one glimpse (perhaps a small measure) of human hands and feet being part of God's work in the world.

At the General Synod of the United Church of Christ, in Baltimore this past June, a new denomination-wide initiative began with the emphasis on our shared mission to create “A Just World for All.” This two-year initiative is called the *Three Great Loves-Love of Neighbor, Love of Children, Love of Creation*.<sup>4</sup> This asks what small thing can be accomplished by individuals, congregations, associations and conferences that will change the world. It is a way of to collaborate and celebrate the work of God's people who send ripples of grace and peace and justice into the kingdom of God.

As a congregation, we are invited to live into this initiative, seek out ways that we can contribute and impact our neighbors, children and creation. I encourage you to

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<sup>4</sup> See [www.ucc.org/3greatloves](http://www.ucc.org/3greatloves) and #3greatloves to find more information, see others' accounts and how we can participate.

investigate the Three Great Loves through the UCC website and Twitter feed as the denomination works to amplify the sacred work already being done. As you leave today feel free to pick up a flyer that has more information. Even the little gesture, the smallest idea, the craziest can spread like a pernicious weed and like yeast-contaminant can bring about something good in God's eyes.

Whether it is the ministries of The Good Samaritan Program, Laundry Love, BREAD, Sunday School, Backpacks for children on the Near East Side, Meals for Faith Mission, Blessing Bags you have given to someone in need, we are a part of the ripple effect into God's kingdom.

What would we share of our experiences here that complements these 3 Great Loves? What face or image comes to you when you think of neighbor, children, or creation? What is going to take root and grow out of control because we become engaged is the work of God in the world.

Maybe it's joining the work to end infant mortality in Franklin County? Maybe it's in a new partnership with a neighborhood food pantry with a goal to deliver 500 items a month to stock the shelves? A monthly service opportunity in the Franklinton area? Hosting world renowned climate

scientists from a university not far from here to educate and discuss the threats to our earth here and now?

There's a shared ministry waiting to emerge from among us. It can start small, it will grow and be nurtured by our hands and feet at work to bring God's love and justice and mercy just a little closer.

If even the moldy and rotten things can be loved by God and used for the building up of the kingdom of heaven, then the things that are hard to see in this world are important too. Surely, we don't have to wait in a far-off place or at some time to come, but we can begin to find the God at work here and now in us, in this community and in the world.

Back to Derrick Weston and the 29<sup>th</sup> Street Community Center. As the months passed, the students saw the goodness grow exponentially. The flowers bloomed, and the people donated plants and pitched in to help water them. A steady stream of people told the students they were glad that the park hadn't remained abandoned.

As for the students, Weston said, "They began to think about how they could improve the quality of the neighborhood where they live. They took more pride in it." Derrick Weston echoed the joy of the rippling kingdom as he talked about his team of high school students. "We've become accidental

conspirators with God in continuing acts of creation.”<sup>5</sup> I love that.

How might we make the reality of God’s love and grace, God’s mercy and justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5: 24)? Grace and love pouring down. Compassion and Peace rising through passion and work of our lives. How might we echo the joy of the rippling kingdom of heaven?

Things out of the common and the ordinary have great purpose for God. When God is in charge, the smallest and most ordinary have a place. Even the things we think aren’t holy are Holy in God’s sight—are, in fact, holy. The seeds on the ground, the weeds and the wheat, the moldy and the rotten, the things hidden from our sight—they all have a place in God’s kingdom. For that I am grateful.

Thanks be to God.

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<sup>5</sup> Carol Howard Merritt, *The Christian Century*, 11/30/2015. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2015-11/knee-deep-renewal>