“The Mustard Seed and Long Range Planning”
I Samuel 15:34-16:13; II Corinthians 5:6-10, Mark 4:26-34

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From the Pulpit
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A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 3, Proper 6, June 14, 2015, dedicated to The Rev. Earl Martin Fritz on 60th Anniversary of his ordination, to the memory of Walter Kropp, to our new members joining today and to their children, to our 16 mission partners headed to Biloxi, MS, to our Long Range Planning Committee, to all our children going to camp this summer….with all of these wondrous Ones, the seeds of faith continue to be planted, nurtured and sown and always to the Glory of God – the one who creates life from the seed!

“The Mustard Seed and Long Range Planning”

I Samuel 15:34-16:13; II Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17; Mark 4:26-34

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our rock and our salvation. Amen.
Today Jesus is sitting with people telling stories. That is all he is doing in Mark 4:26-34 – sitting with people telling stories. He is telling stories about small things becoming great. By our listening to his parables, he is calling us to be still and trust in God’s power to take something small and make it something great.

Dr. Amy-Jill Levine in her book, *Short Stories By Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, writes of the Mustard Seed Parable, “Sometimes a seed is just a seed, a bird is just a bird, and a tree is just a tree.” But, given in the voice of Jesus, the powerful simplicity of our Savior’s words and presence inspires wonder, love, and praise. Please consider such simplicity, splendor and power inspiring no less than the kingdom of God coming to earth.

Seeds are small no matter what. In today’s parable, the mustard seed is held up by Jesus as the smallest seed of all. We can debate that agronomic fact. Some will say, the orchid and cypress seeds are smaller. But, Jesus is telling a parable – not presenting a paper at an Agronomists convention. Let’s understand his point. The point is the mustard seed is small and wondrous. In the words of the great Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther, "If you truly understood a single grain of wheat, you would die of wonder." So the power of the story and the seed are the same. The
power is inside the story, inside the seed – it cannot be seen. It can only be witnessed and experienced.

Have you ever witnessed and experienced the seed of an idea taking root in a person or community? Planted in the soil of the soul or the mind of a person, a seed takes root. There is mysterious and hidden power in a seed taking root. It begins to find life. Under the surface it grows steadily and faithfully. In what seems like no time at all or the eternity of time (depending who is watching the seed from above), the seed can manifest itself in a large bush or a transformed life.

The seed grows through hard earth, hardship and struggle. It pushes back the darkness of the soil or the darkness of the soul and becomes alive in the light of day. We only see it once it has broken the surface of the earth or found voice in impossibility. Author Anne Lamott says it this way, "When God is going to do something wonderful, He or She always starts with a hardship; when God is going to do something amazing, He or She starts with impossibility."

As a teacher who sat on a hillside and taught crowds of learned and unlearned, rich and poor, downtrodden and powerful, using the power of story was an effective way to preach something as hard to describe, let alone define, as the kingdom of God. Jesus reassures his audience that God is in control, no matter how things appear, and no matter what
we do or don't do, and that we can trust the One who works even while we sleep. We are simply called to participate in what God is doing in the world.

Growing seeds are powerful in parables and in life. We experience them as flashes of brilliant hope and the promise of a greater day to come. They may appear as flashes, but they are powerful awakenings nevertheless. Here is a seed growing – a longed-for reconciliation within families and among friends, a healing from illness and grief, just one decision by community leaders that places its most vulnerable members at the top of its agenda rather than at the bottom, the release of one grudge, one act of great and unexpected generosity, the end of one war and one seed of lasting peace, the breaking of one loaf of bread and the nourishment of our souls and our bodies - in all of these things we see and experience the mysterious ways of God.

They may begin, or seem to persist, in smallness, in little steps and small hopes, but the path, Jesus says, leads to greatness, a greatness we cannot see or even imagine today. God can see it. God can imagine it. And most of all, God intends it. The tiny little seed grows into the greatest of all, the mustard tree, strong and great enough to offer shelter and goodness and the stuff of life for those who need to find
a home (the last three paragraphs drawn from The Rev. Dr. Kate Huey, *UCC Weekly Seeds*, June 7, 2015).

We see the unexpected Spirit of God planted as a seed of hope in the anointing of David found in I Samuel 15. As the prophet Samuel sets out to Jesse’s home in Bethlehem (which will later be called “The City of David”) to anoint the new King of Israel, we see that all of Jesse’s fine, strapping sons are not whom the prophet of God seeks. Rather, he is in pursuit of the youngest son, “the runt” (as Eugene Peterson calls him) David, who is out in the fields keeping watch over the sheep. When he comes in the fields he was described as small, bright-eyed and good looking. But, no matter how he looks, Samuel says of this moment, “while men and women look at the face, God looks into the heart” (I Samuel 16:7). From the young, the small, the bright-eyed one comes hope for a nation. From small seeds God brings forth growth!

In case you are paying attention, we have had a team of gardeners working in the community garden of First Church this Spring. Under the thoughtful guidance of the two chief gardeners – Steve Sterrett and Rev. Dan Clark – our Long Range Planning committee has been quietly and effectively collecting seeds in recent months. Along with a community gardening team of 13 others, they have been
collecting seeds of our imagination, vision and inspiration. They are tilling the soil of our future and carefully planting, watering, and tending the seeds as they grow through these summer months with the hope of a harvest of dreams and visions coming in the fall and winter (a different kind of harvest schedule than most farmers and gardeners are accustomed to). From the mustard seeds of our own living parable community, growth will come.

As I have witnessed in the past, our long range planning seeds have produced incredible harvests of hope. Here are but a few examples. In 2000, our congregation believed we needed an Associate Pastor after having gone without one for 3 years. We invested in 2001 and we have been blessed ever since. In September 2011 we set in motion a goal for Congregational Care which has given rise to our Congregational Care team. We also wrote into our plan for the third consecutive LRP the goal of building a playground for our children. In October, 2014, the Sam Gordon Memorial Playground was built and dedicated thanks to a gift from Sam’s will to our church of 30% of his estate – or $121,919.85. That gift from a humble man came because of a seed planted in 2010 during our Capital Campaign. Sam knew he couldn’t give much money to the capital campaign,
but he rewrote his will to make sure the church received a greater gift following his death. Thanks be to God!

You see, seeds grow in God’s beloved communities of faith just as they do in God’s good earth. G.K. Chesterton, writes, "If seeds in the black earth can turn into such beautiful roses, what might not the heart of man become in its long journey toward the stars?" Such seeds of faith flourish in communities in which love and justice walk hand in hand. We have to present to the Long Range Planners the seeds of vision and possibility growing within us. They will take care of them and plant them in places where grow will come and life will flourish.

In her writing on the Parable of the Mustard Seed, Amy-Jill Levine concludes, “What we see now is potential, but that potential needs to be actualized…. The seed has to be planted. Even small actions, or hidden actions, have potential to produce great things.” She continues, we learn three more things. First, some things need to be left alone….keep exposing the seed to air and it will not germinate. Not everything or everyone needs our constant attention….Second, sometimes we need to get out of the way. We are not always the focus, sometimes we are the facilitators for something bigger than ourselves….Who sowed it is much led important than the tree into which the seed grows. Finally…the Kingdom of

From these small seeds of planted in our hearts and minds, great things will grow. God will give the growth – if we plant and tend, leave it in God’s hands, get out of the way, and trust in God. If you don’t believe me, believe the storyteller.

Thanks be to God for the mustard seeds in our lives. Amen.

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