

Eden on Erie

A message by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
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- Daniel 4:1-12 (Good News Translation) ¹ King Nebuchadnezzar sent the following message to the people of all nations, races, and languages in the world: “Greetings! ² Listen to my account of the wonders and miracles which the Supreme God has shown me. ³ “How great are the wonders God shows us! How powerful are the miracles he performs! God is king forever; he will rule for all time. ⁴ “I was living comfortably in my palace, enjoying great prosperity. ⁵ But I had a frightening dream and saw terrifying visions while I was asleep. ⁶ I ordered all the royal advisers in Babylon to be brought to me so that they could tell me what the dream meant. ⁷ Then all the fortunetellers, magicians, wizards, and astrologers were brought in, and I told them my dream, but they could not explain it to me. ⁸ Then Daniel came in.... I said to him: ⁹...This is my dream. Tell me what it means. ¹⁰ “While I was asleep, I had a vision of a huge tree in the middle of the earth. ¹¹ It grew bigger and bigger until it reached the sky and could be seen by everyone in the world. ¹² Its leaves were beautiful, and it was loaded down with fruit—enough for the whole world to eat. Wild animals rested in its shade, birds built nests in its branches, and every kind of living being ate its fruit.
- Matthew 13:31-33 (Good News Translation) ³¹ Jesus told them another parable: “The Kingdom of heaven is like this. A man takes a mustard seed and sows it in his field. ³² It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it grows up, it is the biggest of all plants. It becomes a tree, so that birds come and make their nests in its branches.” ³³ Jesus told them still another parable: “The Kingdom of heaven is like this. A woman takes some yeast and mixes it with a bushel of flour until the whole batch of dough rises.”

Last Sunday afternoon Mary and I went on a field trip of sorts. We visited the Cleveland Lakefront Nature Preserve. Not familiar with it? You might know the area better as “Dike 14,” an encased landfill on the shore of Lake Erie north of Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive and Rockefeller Park. As recently as the 1960s it was not uncommon for solid waste to be dumped into the lake at this site. From 1979 to 1999, when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers would dredge the shipping channel of the Cuyahoga River, they would dump the sediment into this walled-off area in the lake.

Over the years, layers of sediment—essentially sand, soil and clay—were placed within the walls of Dike 14. After the [Army Corps of Engineers] stopped using Dike 14 as a [confined disposal facility] nature took hold....¹

Plants would wash ashore and take root. Seeds would be deposited by wind or wave or animals. Birds and fox and deer, chipmunks and squirrels and rabbits and more discovered this quiet, spacious habitat of grasslands and forest, meadows and mudflats and wetlands and claimed it as their own.

And now anyone can take in the simple, natural loveliness of the area—it’s free, and as long as you don’t bring a pet or a bike, it’s open to anyone.

For both Mary and me, it was hard to imagine that forty years ago where we were walking was little more than an expanse of dirt and clay. As we walked on the paths through the woods and meadows and along the lake, it was amazing to see how much growth had taken place in the last few decades—towering trees, large expanses of wildflowers and grasses and shrubbery: a “Garden of Eden” on the shore of Lake Erie.

¹ <http://www.portofcleveland.com/environment-infrastructure/cleveland-lakefront-nature-preserve>, accessed 7/21/2020

Hearing about that place, and now knowing the history of the space, maybe you can find new appreciation for a parable that Jesus must have told over and over as he traveled through the valleys and over the hills, teaching and preaching to small groups and large crowds.

“The realm of heaven,” people would ask, “tell us what it’s like, Jesus. We can’t imagine!”

So Jesus would use parables – seemingly simple illustrations that left a lot to the imagination. He would speak in parables to paint a mental image of what was hard to imagine.

As we heard in Matthew 13:31-32, Jesus painted this image. “The kingdom of heaven? It’s like a mustard seed. Have you ever seen such a small seed? A farmer plants that tiny seed. And yet from that little seed springs forth a plant, a shrub – it’s like a tree! It’s downright enormous compared to how it started out – birds flock to it to nest in its branches, to rest in its shade.”

Okay, a few disclaimers. Jesus said that the mustard seed was the smallest of all seeds. Well, even in ancient Palestine people knew that the mustard seed – while quite tiny – was not the smallest seed of all. And for a shrub, the mustard plant *did* get pretty big – 4-6 feet tall – and along the shores of the Sea of Galilee it could reach 10 feet in height! But the mustard plant certainly was not “the biggest of plants,” as Jesus said. Jesus was using a story-teller’s license of hyperbole – exaggeration – to help stir his listeners’ imaginations. Nothing wrong with that; I myself exaggerate *all the time*. (Actually, I don’t exaggerate *all the time* – I was exaggerating.)

As someone has commented, the way Jesus stretches the truth can be overlooked because, after all, this parable is intended to communicate matters of theology, not botany, so the exaggerations about being “smallest” and “biggest” aren’t crucial. Plus, the way Jesus told this, he may have had in mind a story from the Hebrew scriptures that his audience would have known. It was a story about King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. The king had this strange dream about a huge tree that grew so big it reached the sky and could be seen by everyone. It was beautiful and laden with fruit. Wild animals rested under its plentiful shade, and birds nested in its branches. Does that sound familiar? See how Jesus might have shaped that parable with the story from Israel’s history so that his audience would grasp it quickly.

So what’s his message to the crowd? What are they to take from the image of a small seed growing beyond imagination to become an expansive, welcoming tree? What Jesus announces is that God’s kingdom, God’s realm, God’s sovereign reign is coming into our world right now. God’s realm is growing and spreading. God’s reign is expanding around us... and within us. Like a minute mustard seed undergoing the botanical mystery of growth, God’s way is taking root, and sprouting, and growing, and spreading, and budding, and expanding and flourishing.

Think how often God’s will shapes the world in that way: starting in a small, humble manner but growing and spreading and touching people’s lives in surprising ways.

You may have seen the news report last week of Queen Elizabeth conferring knighthood on a 100-year-old former British Army officer named Thomas Moore who the British press nicknamed “Captain Tom.” The Queen decided to grant him the

honorific title of “Sir Tom” because of a small deed he began that grew beyond his wildest imagination.

According to the *New York Times*, as Captain Tom approached his 100th birthday, his son-in-law told Tom he would give him £1 per lap if Tom would walk 100 laps of an 82-foot walk on the brick patio next to his garden in... a tranquil village an hour north of London. Captain Tom’s daughter built on the idea, suggesting that they post “the campaign on an online charity [crowd-funding] service... to try to raise £1,000, about \$1,220, for [Britain’s National Health Service], which was then girding itself for an influx of coronavirus patients.” Those announcements were shared on other social media, by word of mouth, and then picked up by the local and international press and broadcast on BBC, CNN, NBC and Al Jazeera . By the time Captain Tom had completed his 100th lap of the walkway before his 100th birthday, public admiration for his determination and strength did raise funds for the National Health Service: not £100, or £1,000, but £33 million (about \$40 million)! ...From a tiny mustard seed grows a sprawling tree!²

Here’s an example a little closer to home for us. A few months ago the local news reported on 7-year-old Lucy DeFranco of Bainbridge Township.

Every morning as she waits in her mother’s car at the end of her driveway for the school bus, Lucy pops out of her mother’s sunroof and waves at people driving by on Chagrin Road. Even after schools were closed by the pandemic and there was no more school bus to wait for, Lucy and her mom kept it up.

“It felt really good because people like when I waved to them,” says the 2nd grader.

Lucy’s smile and wave are reminders that it’s the small things in life that people miss. For some, those small things have the greatest impact.

[One regular commuter said,] “Every morning when I drive in, there’s Lucy just waving and smiling and having a great time.... Sometimes you’re grumpy and not feeling well and not looking forward to another day at work, and Lucy always just brings a smile to my face and makes me think everything’s OK.”

The little waving girl of Bainbridge Township just wants to make other people happy.³

Think of the ripple effect of her gift of happiness touching other people throughout the day. A “mustard seed” gesture grew and branched out far beyond where she stood and waved.

This framework of faith which shapes and supports our lives follows this familiar pattern. Think of it: our Lord Jesus Christ entered the world as a baby born in the little town of Bethlehem, but he grew to touch and change the lives of friends and strangers alike, and his sphere of influence spread throughout Asia and Europe and Africa and across the globe. That “mustard seed” of an infant born in an out-of-the-way province is known and worshiped around the world.

Think of all you can impact throughout this day and in the days ahead. Consider some small act you can do, some word of comfort or encouragement or guidance or

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/15/world/europe/captain-tom-moore.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article> accessed 7/22/2020

³ <https://www.wkyc.com/article/life/heartwarming/little-waving-girl-of-bainbridge-township-reminds-us-all-that-a-small-gesture-can-leave-the-greatest-impact/95-489695a7-b688-4623-838b-cd0ea2f13e6a>, accessed 7/22/2020

justice that you can speak, that may seem insignificant at the moment (if you even notice it at all). But when what you offer serves God's purpose, when it builds God's kingdom, by God's grace and beyond your control it takes root and flourishes and grows beyond anything we could imagine.

Like a tiny mustard seed that grows into a shading, sheltering bush, God uses and blesses our efforts to spread God's compassion and peace and love will grow and spread to care for all the world.

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