

“Mustard Seeds Moving Mountains”

Mary Kay Collins | August 13, 2006 | Matthew 17:14-20

When they came to the crowd, a man came to him, knelt before him, and said, “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly; he often falls into the fire and often into the water. And I brought him to your disciples, but they could not cure him.” Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him here to me.” And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was cured instantly. Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” He said to them, “Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.”

This morning we conclude our three-week look at this story of healing and faith. If you missed either or both of the first two sermons, don’t worry, they’re not to-be-continued kind of sermons, but rather we’ve been looking at different aspects of the story. This healing of the epileptic or possessed boy is recounted in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. We’ve been using Mark’s version until today. First we focused on the father’s powerful statement to Jesus that only Mark includes: “I believe; help my unbelief.” Last week we talked about the healing itself, how we can all bring our pain to Jesus today for healing and wholeness.

Today we consider the conclusion to this story as relayed in Matthew’s Gospel. The story by now should be familiar: A man brings his son to Jesus’ disciples for healing, who by this point have been performing other healings and exorcisms. But the disciples cannot heal him. The man then brings his son to Jesus. Jesus in effect says to his disciples, “Do I have to do everything myself? When will you guys finally get it together?” Then Jesus casts out the demon. Afterward the disciples approach Jesus wondering why they couldn’t heal him. Jesus responds:

Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.

Wow. Now, I like to think, especially given my profession, that I have faith at least the size of a mustard seed. So I wanted to put this statement of Jesus’ to the test. Unfortunately, here in Florida we don’t have any real mountains. But at my house in Maitland we do have a mountain of sorts. My husband and I have three small children, and therefore we usually have a mountain of laundry. I’m pretty good at moving the mountain myself into the washing machine and then into the dryer. But I would love it if through my faith I could say to the mountain in the dryer: *“Move from the dryer into the basket, be folded and sorted and put away into the proper drawer or closet!”* and it would move. Yet I’ve tried it and it doesn’t seem to work. And *forget* about asking my husband—talk about a miracle!

So given the results of this experiment, I'm not even going to try with a real mountain the next time I'm in North Carolina. It seems pretty clear that Jesus is speaking metaphorically or in hyperbole. After all, this is the same Jesus who said that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter heaven. By the standards of Jesus' day we are all unimaginably wealthy, so if that's not to some degree metaphorical then we're all in trouble!

So let's talk about what Jesus might be trying to say to us today in this passage. I often cite this metaphor of mustard-seed-sized faith in order to express the very good news that we don't have to have it all figured out in order to profess and experience our faith in Jesus Christ. We talked about this when considering the father in the story, who says to Jesus, "I believe; help my unbelief!" Jesus doesn't say to the father, come back when you've got your stuff together or when your doubts have been dealt with—no, Jesus hears the father struggling with his faith and responds by healing his son. What good news indeed this is for all of us who ever doubt—and I'm guessing this is all of us. As theologian Paul Tillich said, "Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is one element of faith."

And yet as we look more closely at the text we see that Jesus seems to be saying that his disciples *do not even* have faith the size of a mustard seed. The disciples ask why they couldn't heal the boy; Jesus says because of their "little faith," *going on* to say that if they had faith the size of a mustard seed they could move mountains. One could be discouraged by this—after all, the disciples were *right there* in the flesh with Jesus. They witnessed miracles first hand. And yet *even they* didn't have a mustard seed sized faith?

But of course we have the one all-important thing that the disciples in this story *didn't* have: we know the end of the story—or perhaps a better way to put it would be that we know the true beginning of the story. We know the Resurrection. We know, even if in only in some mysterious way, the living eternal Christ. The disciples didn't yet understand that. Even John the Baptist, to whom the skies had opened up, God's voice beaming through saying that Jesus was God's beloved son, didn't understand that. Near the end of his life John the Baptist, in prison, sends a message to Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" [Matthew 11:3] The people of Israel weren't expecting this kind of Messiah. Jesus had turned their worldview upside down.

It's here that I want us to consider the mustard seed itself. Jesus uses this as a symbol with some very specific meanings. Jesus used the metaphor of a mustard seed several times as recorded in the Gospels. Equally famous to this story is Jesus' Parable of the Mustard Seed, also found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Here is Luke's version [13:18-19]: Jesus said, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and

sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.”

In both cases, it's important to know a little bit about the mustard seed as it was perceived in that time. Jesus used many agricultural metaphors because he was living in an agricultural society. Perhaps if he were speaking to us today he would use metaphors like cell phones and computer viruses. In any event, sowing a mustard seed in a garden had certain cultural connotations.

First, when Jesus says that a mustard seed grows to become a tree, keep in mind that it's a small tree, and more accurately a shrub. But it's a fast-growing shrub and was considered one step up from a weed. No gardener would want to sow a mustard seed in his garden, because it would take over.

The other thing to know is that Jesus' audience already had a dominant symbol for the coming Kingdom of God, and it was the great cedar tree of Lebanon. This tree is mentioned 75 times in the Bible, mostly in the Old Testament. It is today on the flag of the country of Lebanon, which is especially poignant considering what's happening in Lebanon right now. According to Father Thomas Keating:

Cedars of Lebanon were comparable to the huge redwood trees of California. They grew straight up for two or three hundred feet or more. Every kind of bird could enjoy their shade. This image was deeply embedded in the cultural conditioning of the Jewish people. The kingdom of God as a nation would be the greatest of all nations just as the great cedar of Lebanon was the greatest of all trees.¹

So the people of Israel would expect their Messiah to say the Kingdom of God is like the cedar of Lebanon, or that their faith should be like a cedar of Lebanon. Not like a mustard seed.

Jesus Christ wasn't the Messiah they were expecting! Jesus Christ came to this earth, walked among the disciples, ate with them, loved them, had patience with them, was discouraged by them, cared for them, taught them, showed them, prayed with them—this wasn't the Messiah they were expecting. Jesus' kingdom grew like a mustard seed plant, with the people, not like a cedar tree above and distant from the people. Jesus Christ loved and taught them that what they needed was faith, faith the size of a mustard seed. They needed to believe enough that they would let Christ enter their hearts and then Christ's love would grow within them, like a mustard seed grows and takes over a garden. Having received this love, Christ charged them to go out and do what? Love God and one another. That is what Jesus commands us to do. He doesn't command us to lord our faith over others, or to think better of ourselves and to keep our faith

¹ Keating, *The Kingdom of God is Like*, Chapter 5.

private. Jesus came for everyone, and he invites us to him, he invites us by loving us.

We are invited to come with our mustard seed size faith. Maybe we come wanting to trust but don't think we know how? Maybe we come discouraged and depressed, and a mustard seed size faith feels like even more than we can handle? Maybe we come afraid that Christ couldn't *really* love us unconditionally?

Regardless, we are invited to come, offering up what faith we have and letting Christ grow us. Just like a mustard seed grows in a garden, Christ's love covers us up, it covers up the painful, the ugly, the hardened, the diseased, Christ's love fills us up and as we are covered by this love, we will desire to share this love with others. When we come to Christ, just as we are, when we offer ourselves to him, his love grows inside us.

His love will grow such that we can move mountains—maybe not literally, but in much more powerful ways. If we think of our faith as being like a mustard seed, tiny but full of potential, then imagine if we all truly cultivated our seeds of faith, if we all let this plant take over our garden. This is what we, God's people, this church are being asked to do, acknowledging that we might have fears, concerns, acknowledging that we are entering into unknowns. And indeed, there is a lot that is uncertain about the future. As we discussed last week, we are not promised an easy ride or a life free from pain—but we are promised wholeness through Jesus Christ. What we know is that Christ loves us so much and has called us to share this love with others. We are all invited to focus on our mustard seed of faith, to ask God to nurture and grow this in us, to encourage others in their growth and together be covered by the love that Christ gives us, freely!

Moving a mountain would pale in comparison to the power that would be unleashed in the world if everyone who said they believed in Jesus would share the Good News in word and deed, would share Christ's love the way he taught us. Today we are invited, we are reminded, this church, you individually to know Christ's love and to share Christ's love.

This morning we have [have just had] our Rally Day / Sunday School expo. There are many people in this church who are cultivating their mustard seeds by providing Christian education, which will allow our faith to keep growing. What are you doing? How are you nurturing that mustard seed size faith in you? We are invited to come, just as we are—that sounds easy enough, and yet it can be scary. Come today, maybe for the first time, come again asking for renewal, come and let Christ love you into the person you were created to be! Come confidently knowing that Christ has called you and loves you.

Let us pray.