

The Mustard Seed
June 18, 2006
Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliott, Jr.

There are two parables in the Gospel reading for this Sunday. I would like to share some thoughts with you today on one of them, *the mustard seed*, and make a contrast between what Jesus wanted his listeners to hear and what his listeners themselves wanted to hear, and they are not the same.

The purpose of the parables is to subvert the distorted myths in which people lead their lives. To understand what is meant by *living a myth*, think of a couple of our own myths. Take the myth of the *All American Boy*, for example. This is the young man who gets straight A's in college and graduate school, climbs the executive ladder and, maybe, even becomes the head of a multi-national corporation. Or, there is the *girl next door*, the idealized hope of every young man for his life-long marriage partner. Or, the *American Dream*, a five or six bedroom home, two cars in the garage, vacations around the world, a house at the Shore and so forth. On a more serious note, the American Dream has been a vision of America's invincibility, of its absolute entitlement in the eyes of God.

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A myth is often what holds people's lives together. It is an attempt to resolve the tensions of everyday life by promising an idealized future in which one will be rescued from all the problems of ordinary life. When the myth begins to falter, great leaders may try to find ways to recapture the glory of the earlier days, like John Kennedy's effort to rekindle the American Dream by sending a man to the Moon. American astronauts did go to the Moon, but, meanwhile, the Vietnam War devastated the prestige of American invincibility and with it the American Dream.

For the Israelites of Jesus' time, the tension between everyday reality and a mythical vision of Israel as God's chosen people was felt with particular urgency. From the heyday of national prestige and power during the reigns of King David and King Solomon, Israel had been on a downhill slide for several centuries, its kingdom conquered and divided several times over. The question naturally arises, *Is this God's doing or just part of the human condition?* In the particular myth in which the people of the first century Israel were living, the Kingdom of

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God had specific connotations of power, triumph, holiness and goodness. The Kingdom, when it came, would introduce a glorious new age of universal peace, with God's chosen people at the head of the nations of the known world.

The cultural symbol for this myth was the great Cedar of Lebanon. These trees were comparable to the huge Redwoods and Sequoias of California. They grew straight up for 250 feet or more. The Kingdom of God would be the greatest of all nations just as the great Cedar of Lebanon was the greatest of all trees.

Instead of that Jesus proposes the mustard seed as a comparison to the Kingdom of God. What is a mustard seed? The mustard seed is very tiny and produces a fast spreading plant, which grows about four feet tall, puts out a few branches and possibly could house a bird or two.

Steeped in their cultural images of the great Cedar of Lebanon, the hearers of the parable would be expecting this seed, Jesus' symbol of the Kingdom, to grow into a mighty, apocalyptic tree.

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Jesus' point is exactly the opposite. It just becomes a bush, that's all, and the parable subverts all the grandiose ideas about what the Kingdom is going to be like when it finally arrives.

One of the most firmly held Israelite expectations was that the Kingdom would manifest the final triumph of God in history. It was a *future* kingdom, not one in the *here and now*. Jesus' parable implies that if we *accept* the God of everyday life, we *can find* God in everyday life. We don't have to wait for an apocalyptic deliverance. We don't have to wait for some majestic liberation. The Kingdom is available right now. And in this parable, Jesus intimates that God is not necessarily going to intervene in this world for the triumph of the just. He has entrusted it to *us* to bring about justice and peace. We may get only modest results, but it *is up to us*.

And the parable further suggests that God's greatest works are not done on a level of glorious splendor, not in Cathedrals, big buildings or large mausoleums. Cathedrals, sad to say, can become museums rather than sources of inspiration for the

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Christian community. The Kingdom is in every day life with its ups and downs, and, above all, its insignificance. It is there, after all, that most of us live our lives.

So hard was it for the people of Jesus' time to get over the idea of the Kingdom of God as a triumphant institution that even the Evangelists tried to change it into something great anyway. The parable was *meant* to change one's idea about the Kingdom, but what happened was that the old mindset began to interpret the parable in a way that was consistent with its former mythical expectations.

If we are looking for a great expansion of our particular religion, nation, ethnic group, social movement, or whatever, into some great organization that fills the earth, we shall truly be disappointed. This is not God's idea of success. The mightiest works of the Kingdom are accomplished in our own attitudes and hence in secret. Where there is charity, there is God. Opportunities to work for the homeless, the starving, and the aging are all readily available. No one may notice our good

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deeds, including us. The Kingdom of God manifests itself in the *modest* changes in our attitudes and in the little improvements in our behavior that no one may notice, again, including ourselves. These are the mighty works, no great, visible, external accomplishments.

To what shall I liken the Kingdom of God? Jesus asked. The Kingdom is manifested in ordinary daily life and how we live it. Can we *accept* the God of everyday life? If we can, then we can enjoy the Kingdom without having to wait for an apocalypse, or someone to grant us deliverance from our difficulties. The Kingdom is *here*; the time is *now*.

AMEN.