

## **Mystery and Growth – The Parable of the Mustard Seed**

**Luke 13:18-19 by Patty Friesen and Patrick Preheim (Aug.7/16)**

The mustard seed is a small thing that enables many to be fed. It is the name of a faith community that feeds inner city homeless in Edmonton and Calgary and was the name of a small faith community that met in Saskatoon for a number of years. It is the story of Bob Wheeler. Bob Wheeler is an ex-cop from Philadelphia who some years back decided to make a difference in the neighbourhood where he grew up. Juniata is a working-class North Philadelphia neighbourhood of well-tended brick row houses ringed by industrial buildings, corner stores, and aging playing fields. In 2003 a fire destroyed the Juniata Golf clubhouse, where Wheeler was serving as club manager in his retirement. The golf club had been declining for a number of years--the victim of scarce funding, vandalism and neglect, and it looked like the club might close after the fire.

Bob did not want to see this pillar of his old community close. He suspected it would take considerable time to resuscitate the community space, but resolutely devoted his passion and gifts to the project. He decided to put together a non-profit foundation to run the course. He solicited contributions from people and business he had gotten to know through growing up there and through his work on the beat. He used his personal credibility to gather volunteers to convert the old cart barn into the new clubhouse. He developed a plan by which volunteers were given free rounds of golf in exchange for clean up, improvements, and courteously marshalling non-golfers off the course during golfing hours. It has taken five years, but the new club is just now a few months into its first season.

The course's 85-acre green space offers elbowroom in a community where there is little of it. The first hole is the traditional sledding hill in Juniata, and neighbourhood kids can wander

the course after golfers have finished up. Parents know that if their children go over to play or help out with work, they can expect them to be safe and supervised for five or six hours. Says the grey-haired, ruddy-faced ex-cop, who still spends his days in shorts and sneakers: "The kids need a place where they can stretch out." ("Philly's tin-cup course" by Mary Beth Ccauley in *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 23, 2008; p. 20)

The Kingdom of heaven is like a tree where the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches. Our parable this morning and this story about Bob Wheeler highlight several truths about the way in which the kingdom of God works. The Kingdom of God emerges through the mirco, not the macro. Whether true or not our text makes the claim that the mustard seed is the smallest of all the seeds. Clearly, first century agronomy was not as sophisticated as 21<sup>st</sup> century seed cataloguing, but the focus is on the size of the seed rather than the genus of the seed. We have the smallest of things, which grows up to provide nesting habitat for the birds of the air.

In Ezekiel 31:6 we also have a tree providing nesting ground for the birds of the air. In Ezekiel, however, the tree is a Cedar whose height cannot be rivalled. It is, by Ezekiel's vision, a great tree if not the greatest of all trees. In Daniel 4.11-12 we hear that King Nebuchadnezzar has also dreamed of a "great tree" which hosts the "birds of the air". Great trees in the Old Testament, it seems, refer to large empires. The United States with its military bases or China with its economic influence would be considered a Cedar by Old Testament standards. In both Daniel and Ezekiel, it should be noted, the great trees get their tops cropped by God on account of arrogance. I think Jesus is very much aware of the way in which great trees were portrayed in his Hebrew canon: they are political entities which extend over and through other nations.

The great tree in our parable is really a small tree, unlike the Cedar. Both the Cedar of the Hebrew Scriptures and the mustard tree house the birds of the air, but they do so differently. The kingdom of God is not about arrogance, dominance, or politics. Jesus says that God wants

to protect, care for, and minister to the birds of the world and chooses to do it through small acts rather than power politics. A mustard seed is not an exciting element, certainly not like a great cedar tree. You do not find shingles, furniture, or heirloom chests made of mustard tree wood.”

(Gordon Zerby, “Jesus uses the power of images” in *The Mennonite*, October 10, 1995; p. 12) It is as if Jesus is saying the kingdom of God will emerge from the most unlikely of sources.

In these parables God is talking to us whether we are a Cedar or a mustard tree. The challenge for the mustard seeds among us is to see our potential. Too many of us view ourselves as too old, too young, too inexperienced, too flawed, too this or too that to be an effective agent in God’s ministry to the world. We view ourselves negatively, like leaven, or as barren earth with only tiny unimportant seeds. But Jesus says there is meaning for those who feel small. There is purpose in this world for those who feel on the margins. Jesus gives us purpose and meaning. Each of us, even the tiny and the leaven, has the potential and calling to protect, care for, to feed the birds of the world. This is good news. God wants to work the kingdom through us even when we feel badly about ourselves. I have poem illustrating the power of smallness. I find it a comfort those days I identify with the smallness of a mustard seed. This poem authored by Jim Moore and entitled “Against Empire”; it appears in his book called *Lightening at Dinner* (p.43). Jim was a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War, and currently teaches writing.

Small Olives taste best

Small stars shine farthest

Small birds call

most sweetly. Small lives,

we are small, small lives.

Cedars, too, are created by God. They have different struggles than mustard seeds. The spiritual challenge for the Cedars is to put away arrogance and domineering attitudes. At Osler Mennonite, we are actually lofty Cedars in the community, despite how others try to make us small. Our church has so many cedars who are doing amazing things in our volunteering and work. Our building is large and new and a tremendous resource for our community as we determined in our visioning process last year. Large Cedars have great potential to shelter many birds. Being a Cedar is only negative if prestige and protection become the motivating force of the operation. We need to care for the other trees, plants, and creatures who reside in our large boughs.

Mennonite artist Joel Enns from Rosthern has these reflections on trees and mustard seeds. His art teacher took the class to Emma Lake and made them sketch various aspects of the landscape. The teacher wanted them to pay attention to what the land is saying. Drawing makes a person slow down, focus, and think. Joel's reflections on the trembling aspen is a contemporary mustard seed parable and highlights the opportunities we all have to translate the parables into our own experience.

The Trembling aspen grows quickly from seedling to maturity but still it may seem rather small and insignificant when compared to the trees around it. At the very least it is unimpressive. This single tree will never be the biggest or the longest lived but that is only at first glance. Under the ground the tree begins to send out roots away from its stem both soaking up water and nutrients and also looking to expand. Along the length of each root new shoots begin to develop and if there is enough sunlight available new stems begin to grow. These new stems require more water and nutrients and so the roots push out further and with them more and more stems begin to grow. Even though these stems may have grown for up to a hundred years or more and appear to be separate trees, they all stay connected in the soil by their roots, transferring water and nutrients from tree to tree, nourishing all to sustain the young

and the old. Each new stem is a copy of the original stem. Though stems may look slightly different from one another, each is genetically identical and all the stems act in unison.

As aspen spread they can quickly become the dominant species in a forest, yet they are constructed in such a way that other species are encouraged to live alongside and underneath them. Whereas many trees aim to soak up as much sun as possible to both nourish the tree and also kill off any competitors, aspen have a specially designed leaf which allows it to flutter in the wind and this fluttering lets light down to the plants below. Light is given, not to young aspen but to shrubs, forbs and grasses, all competing for the same essential resources.

Death is inevitable and after eighty years of growth a stem becomes old. Its growth slows and the wood weakens and begins to fall apart. Death can also come violently. People and fire can quickly consume everything in their paths. Yet, this is not the end, for with each death the hormones in the roots shift and encourage new shoots to grow into the spaces left by the deceased. And so, life for the tree continues well beyond the age of any individual stem...Yes, I would dare to step away from the mustard seed and say that the kingdom of God is like a Trembling aspen.”

Some of us are Cedars. Some of us are mustard trees. Some of us are trembling aspens. May we recognize that we have been created and sustained by God. May we understand the grace and teaching offered us in Christ Jesus. May we, in turn, extend grace and refuge to those who inhabit this world with us. Amen.

(On back table: John Gascho's tree cards and Saskatoon tree tour books)