

“Practicing Pentecost: After Planting”
Rev. Tom Steffen
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“Consider a mustard seed. When scattered...it is the smallest of all seeds....
But after (when) it’s planted, it grows...” Mark 4:31, 32

I’m thinking about the twelve-year-old boy who answers the doorbell at his home one day. When he opens it, there stands a strange man on the porch. The man says, “Son, you don’t know me, do you?” The boy shakes his head no, he did not. The man at the door replies, “Well, I am your uncle on your father’s side.” To which the boy replies, “Well, I am glad to meet you, but you are certainly on the losing side around here.”

On a Father’s Day, perhaps it is okay to admit that, of late, fathers in particular and men in general have had a rough go of it. A funny thing happened on the way to 2018, and it’s not been a laughing matter for men or women. St. Paul’s belief that “in Christ” we – both men and women – have a chance to become new creations was put in bold relief as Harvey Weinstein was placed “in handcuffs” a couple of weeks ago. The losing side, to be sure. I’m proud to say that the men I know here at First Church, especially those who gather on Thursday mornings, are men and fathers and uncles who work at becoming new and better, more faithful and empathic and compassionate, the kind of men we all deserve to have in our lives. May the living Christ continue to honor our desire to be made new – men and women, from the inside out – body, mind and spirit, so that one day there will be no “losing side.”

The gospel reading for today records Jesus’ invitation to “consider the mustard seed.” Just recently, I learned that Spanish mustard seeds—whose plants now blanket the Napa Valley and much of the California coast—were first scattered in the 1800s by Father Junipero Serra on his way up the coast from Mexico to explore possible mission sites. By the time the priest and his band turned around to head back to Mexico, the mustard plants were in full bloom. Of course, we know that the history of mustard seed and mission planting is a bit checkered. Some who brought Christianity to California also pressed Native Americans into slavery, forcing them to convert, which is a bit of an oxymoron. And sadly, with conquering comes diseases and the demise of indigenous populations and their cultures. Planting is a mixed bag; seeds and seed planters vary, as do their quality and intent.

I want to suggest that Jesus’ invitation to consider the mustard seed is an invitation to honestly face the contradictions in life and the consequences of planting. Missions planted in the name of Christ that employ very un-Christ-like methods? That doesn’t seem right. And what about the ongoing controversy over the re-evaluation of Civil War statues? Or the right to choose? – are we not still debating that? And what about the right to life? And the pressure to convert; “conversion therapy” it is called in some circles. Consider the mustard seed, “well, no thanks,” you may be thinking. We are tired of controversy and contradictions and worrying about consequences; the beauty of the yellow flowers has all but lost its brilliance. And yet, and yet, gently, I can hear Jesus say: “Consider it anyway; you will not always be tired. Consider the mustard seed in little doses; just remember that small things planted grow and sometimes grow big.”

Why? Why should we consider the mustard seed? Well, from what I can tell, there is a tension between beauty and destruction that runs through just about everything, you and me included. And maybe this is a reason why Jesus taught almost exclusively in parables.

I read somewhere that the mustard seed, despite its springtime beauty, is a weed that spreads wildly, often to the detriment of nutrients needed by other plants. Invasive, pervasive, blown by the wind—once the mustard plant takes root, it takes over with wild unpredictability, which means that it takes great effort to control it. And yet Jesus chooses the mustard seed as a metaphor for God’s way with us. Interesting. Lutheran writer and pastor David Lose says that it must be that God’s reality, like the mustard plant, bursts out of control. God’s reality “invades, overturns, and eventually overcomes the old one.... And it’s definitely not safe, not, that is, if we are even minimally satisfied with the way things are. So be careful what you ask for.”

To practice Pentecost, to participate in the unpredictable, wind-like movement of holy Spirit in a mustard-seed world, is to remain aware of what happens after we plant. It is our nature to plant – to act, do, build, create, discover, invent and reinvent – yes, to make a foot print, sure, but “in Christ” it is our second nature to take responsibility after we plant. Two adages come to mind. The first one is attributed to George Fuechsel, an IBM computer programmer: “Garbage in, garbage out!” You’ve heard one, right? And there’s this one, which predates it: “You break it, you buy it!” Right? Well, what if we don’t want it after we’ve broken it? Well, consider the mustard seed. Plant. Go on plant but only after you have figured out what you are going to do after planting.

And I’ve also been thinking about two other adages, more positive ones: “Pray as if it is all up to God, and work as if it is all up to you.” I’ve often credited John Wesley for that saying, but I suspect he wasn’t the first to live by it. And the second one I found printed on a sign as I entered a large grove of oak trees: “The best time to plant a tree was 200 years ago!” It is amazing to discover that it can take 40 years for an oak to produce its first acorn; beauty will not be rushed. But the sign didn’t end there. The best time to plant was 200 years ago. “The second best time is today.” Today.

So

? So what? As in the mustard plant itself, there is dark and light in mustard-seed living, but beauty can grow out of the darkness, for it lies at its roots. But for beauty to emerge, the dark must be acknowledged; this is the paradox that lies at the heart of God’s way with us.

I will close with a story, especially fitting for today, I think. I stumbled upon it some 10 years ago in an article entitled “Why Fathers Hide Their Feelings.” In it, the author refers to the time when he was riding home with his son.

“The speech was finished,” he writes, “and the audience had been generous with its applause, and in the car on the way home my 14-year-old son looked over at me. “I really admire you, Dad,” he said. “Being able to get up there and give a speech like that. You always seem to know what to say to people. You always seem to know what you’re doing.” At the moment, I didn’t know what to say in response. What I wanted to say to my son was that his father was not always what he appeared to be, and that being a man is frequently a facade. It had taken me a long time to admit that – even to myself, especially to myself. My father, after all, really had always known what he was doing! He was strong and confident and he never felt pain, never knew fear.... never cried. For a long time I wondered how such a man could have produced such a weakling for a son.”

Do you hear the pain in those words? Listen to how he concluded the article:

“I know now what I should have said to my 14-year-old son in the car that night. I should have told him that his father, like lots of fathers, isn’t really what he seems.... and every once in a while wants to sit down and cry for no good reason at all. I should have told him that the only reason his father doesn’t admit his weaknesses is because he is afraid that someone will think he is not a real man.... What I should have said to my son that night is that someday, when he’s a father, he will know fear and self-doubt and pain, and that it’s all right. But my father never told me, and I haven’t told my son.”

Consider a mustard seed. When scattered...it is the smallest of all seeds.... But after it’s planted, it grows. After. Amen.