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Our Redeemer's Lutheran Church
June 14, 2009
Ordinary Time—Lect. 11
Mark 4:26-34

<<Slide 1>> The reading of the Gospel

“Planted” Responses to the Gospel: (early service: Carolyn Chaussee; late service: Taran Denning and Kathy Olson)

<<Slide 2>>

Person 1: Did I hear that right? Did Jesus say, the kingdom is like **a mustard seed**?!

Person 2: Yeah, that's what Jesus said. I don't understand what he's talking about. The kingdom is much more like the tall and lofty cedars, don't you think? Substantial trees. Old trees. Trees that everyone can see from a distance. That's what the kingdom of God is like—not some scrubby little bush.

Person 1: I'm not even sure it qualifies as a bush...it's **a weed**! It's always coming up in my fields. Once I think I've gotten rid of it, here it is again!

Person 2: That's right, it's nothing special! It's everywhere we look. Along every pathway, in every field. It's so *common*, so *ordinary*.

Person 1: God's kingdom, a mustard plant! Humph!

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

We use lots of words to describe Jesus: compassionate, wise, prophetic, majestic... and dare I say it: confusing! Jesus was downright confusing! The responses of these poor farmers to Jesus' parables are how, I imagine, many people responded to Jesus. The farmers this morning couldn't understand why Jesus was comparing such a *great thing* as God's kingdom to a miniscule little mustard seed. The people knew the Torah and they would have been familiar with the image of the tall and lofty cedars of God's kingdom that we heard described this morning from the prophet Ezekiel. The people wondered: Why would Jesus portray God's

kingdom so differently? Jesus didn't speak of the lofty cedars but instead, something so small as a mustard seed and so common and weed-like as a mustard plant! It just didn't make sense!

And Jesus confused *everyone*, not only the everyday people, he confused those who yearned for freedom from Roman oppression. When Jesus arrived on the scene, he encountered a group of Jews called the Zealots who wanted to secure Israel's national independence and stability. The Zealots were ready for war and were willing to try to overthrow the Romans. They were looking for one who would restore peace to their land. Jesus emerged as a religious leader, yet, as we know, Jesus did not pick up the sword to drive out the Romans and take possession of David's throne. Instead, he spoke of the Kingdom of God in terms of the frailest embodiment of life--a small seed which was so far from what they thought was needed to defeat evil as to make it *absurd*. It was like promising to develop a winning hockey team by teaching knitting!

Undoubtedly, the disciples must have wondered, "what in the world does he mean by telling nonsensical stories when what we need is a strategy to defeat the evil one and run the Romans out of town?" Well, Jesus was a storyteller. He knew the power of stories and that even if those stories didn't make sense right away for his followers, they would one day.

I think it's time to tell another story. This is one that may be familiar to some of you. It is called "The Tale of Three Trees" and it is an American folktale. I have borrowed a copy of this story with illustrations from Julie Peck and while it may at first appear to be a simple tale for children, I find it to be a profound story.

<<Slide 3>>Once upon a time there were three small trees growing in the forest. Like all young things they dreamed about what they would be when they grew up. They talked and shared these dreams with each other.

<<Slide 4>>The first tree looked up at the stars twinkling like diamonds above him. “I want to hold treasure,” he said. “I want to be covered with gold and filled with precious stones. I will be the most beautiful treasure chest in the world!”

<<Slide 5>>The second tree looked down into the valley at the rivers and the great ships on the ocean and said, “When I grow up, my timber will be used for the main keel of a great war ship. I will travel all over the world and a great commander will speak to his men from the bow. What an adventure I will have!”

The third tree said, “When I grow up, I will become the carved beams on the outside of the temple. Master carvers will carve pictures of what God is like. And there I will stay to show all the people who come to the temple what God’s love is really like.

Well the trees grew and grew for many years. All the time during their growth, they never lost the dreams of what they would be when they were grown.

<<Slide 6>>Finally, one day woodcutters came into the forest and selected the first tree. How fantastic! Now his dreams would come true. He was headed for the palace of a king to be a treasure chest filled with gold! The woodcutters cut the tree down and hauled it off, and the trees said goodbye to each other. But at the mill, he was not cut up and made into a treasure chest. Instead, he was made into a series of thinner boards.

<<Slide 7>>The woodcutter brought him to a carpenter’s shop, but the busy carpenter was not thinking about treasure chests. Instead his work-worn hands fashioned the tree into a feed box for animals. The once-beautiful tree was not covered with gold or filled with treasure. He was coated with sawdust and filled with hay for hungry farm animals. How sad the tree was. All his dreams were destroyed. Of all things, the humiliation of being stalls and a manger in a barn.

<<Slide 8>>But one cold night, a young couple came to Bethlehem, and because there was no room in the inn, they were allowed to spend the night in the stable. During the night, the young woman gave birth to her first son. Golden starlight poured over the first tree as the young woman placed her newborn baby in the feed box. “I wish I could make a cradle for him,” her husband whispered. The mother squeezed his hand and smiled as the starlight shone on the smooth and sturdy wood. “This manger is beautiful,” she said. There was music in the air and the angels sang and shepherds came to visit the new baby, and they knelt and worshipped him as the new king of the earth. The tree was very happy. The tree knew he was holding the greatest treasure in the world.

<<Slide 9>>About 20 years later, the woodcutters returned to the woods and selected the second tree. “How great,” he thought. “Now I’m going to be part of a great ship.” The woodcutters hauled the tree away to the mill, and sent the wood to a shipyard where the planks became the deck of a fishing boat. Too small and too weak to sail an ocean or even a river, he was taken to a little lake. Every day he brought in loads of dead, smelly fish. How disappointed he was, to be reduced from a war ship to a stinking fishing boat.

<<Slide 10>>One evening a tired traveler and his friends crowded into the old fishing boat. The traveler fell asleep as the second tree quietly sailed out into the lake. Soon a thundering and trashing storm arose. The little tree shuddered. He knew he did not have the strength to carry so many passengers safely through the wind and rain. The tired man awakened. He stood up, stretched out his hand, and said, “Peace.” The storm stopped as quickly as it had begun. And suddenly the second tree knew he was carrying the King of heaven and earth.

<<Slide 11>>A few years later, the woodcutters went back into the woods and selected the third tree. How happy he was! Now he would become the carved timbers on the temple to show

everyone what God was really like! But the woodcutters hauled the tree to Jerusalem to another kind of carpenter whose business was to make huge crosses which were then used to execute criminals. How terrible he felt. His dreams were shattered.

<<Slide 12>>But soon he was made into a cross. With the town in an uproar, he was laid on the back of a man whose face was kind and compassionate. The man carried the cross until he fell and another man helped him carry the cross to a hill where the man laid on it. The tree shuddered when soldiers nailed a man's hands to her. The tree felt ugly and harsh and cruel. The cross was raised in the air. There he hung with two others to die. The sign on the cross said, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." A Roman soldier looked at him and said, "Surely, this is the son of God."

<<Slide 13>>ⁱOn Sunday morning when the sun rose and the earth trembled with joy beneath her, the third tree knew that God's love had changed everything. It had made the first tree beautiful. It had made the second tree strong. And every time people thought of the third tree, they would think of God.

<<Slide 14>>

This story of three trees causes us to rethink our expectations of what greatness looks like in the kingdom of God. It is not, as the three little trees discovered, to be a treasure chest, the keel of a great war ship or even a pillar in the temple. Instead, they found greatness as a feedbox for animals; a small, everyday vessel for fishermen; and as a cross. Their greatness was not in what they were but what they bore.

What does greatness look like to us?

I suspect that we are not so different from the farmers who saw greatness in the great cedars of Lebanon and not the mustard plant. Or the three little trees who had visions of

greatness as a treasure chest, a war ship and a temple. We are quick to equate fame, wealth and power with greatness. Perhaps we fear that if we do not attain fame or wealth or power, our lives cannot have meaning or purpose. Let us not discount the transforming power of Christ who can work through every one of us. Ordinary people. Everyday conversations. We are as likely to encounter Christ through the ordinary as we are in the extraordinary.

In bread and wine. In water. Nothing special. Ordinary bread. Ordinary water.

Maybe the farmer's observations about mustard plant being a weed in the fields is *exactly* what Jesus intended to imply about the nature of the Kingdom of God—it's like the mustard plant, a weed! (We don't fight mustard plants here, but anyone who has ever had a lawn will attest to the resilience and the annoying persistence of the dandelion, so let's use that image instead.) Like the dandelion breaking through weed cloth (and not just one layer but two), the Kingdom of God is centered on one who broke through the bonds of sin and death and was resurrected to new life. Like the dandelion persisting in every sidewalk crack where it seems impossible for a plant to grow, the Kingdom of God broke through the Roman Empire and eventually became the official religion of the Empire not by the sword as the Zealots would have thought but by the power of a story—the Gospel. Like dandelion seed being carried on the wind, the principles of the Kingdom of God—forgiveness, respect, kindness, justice—are carried by us through our every word and action. This is the paradoxical logic of the Kingdom of God: its greatness lies not in how the extraordinary is exemplified but in how the ordinary can bear God.

¹ The Tale of Three Trees: A Traditional Folktale. Illustrations: Tim Jonke. Oxford, Batavia, Sydney: A Lion Picture Story, 1989.