

"Grow into Your Fullness"
Ezekiel 17: 22 – 24 Mark 4: 24 – 36
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Has anyone ever said to you "You have such potential ..."?

The statement is usually meant in a positive way, but it can easily be taken as a kind of insult. Just in case you missed it, the insult is this: "Clearly you are not OK the way you are. You will only be OK when you achieve some yet-to-be-determined position or status in life: when you live up to your potential."

Today, on I want to preach my sermon in a way that affirms human potential without diminishing in any way the incredible value of who you each of you is right this minute.

In order to achieve my goal, I plan to use the metaphor of the mustard seed that Jesus gave in today's scripture reading. But before getting into the specifics of the way the mustard seed points toward the Realm of God, let's think about trees in general and how they grow.

Perhaps some of you have fruit trees in your yard. If you do, I invite you to picture one of those trees. And if you don't, I invite you to picture any fruit tree. Of course, everyone knows that a fruit tree's purpose is to produce fruit. Right? So, imagine with me for a moment that it's the month of May. You go into your yard to find out how the tree is doing. You find no fruit! In the places where the fruit should be hanging, all you can find are silly little flowers. I suppose you could conclude that your tree is being frivolous and not tending to business.

But, if you know anything at all about trees, finding flowers on a fruit tree wouldn't upset you at all, now would it? In fact, I think you would be delighted, because the tree is doing exactly what it is supposed to be doing in May. Without the presence of these flowers now, the tree will never produce fruit in its proper season.

And so it is for you. And I mean all of you. The metaphor of the tree parallels the nature of all human growth and development. We are human beings, not fruit trees and we are wonderfully complex. And while we may be in the process of bearing fruit in certain areas of our lives, we might also be generating something more like spring flowers in other areas. For that matter, it might be December when we might even be lying fallow in yet others.

The point here is that growth is a process and it is the health and the energetic nature of the process that determines the quality of our being in the world, not the particular place we have reached at any given time in the natural cycle.

So let's put these comments in the context of our scripture reading today. What is Jesus talking about when he uses the mustard seed as a metaphor for the Realm of God? Chances are that we've heard these words of scripture many times throughout our whole lives, so we already know about the example of the tiny little seed that grows into a great tree. It would be very easy to overstate this layer of meaning, and people often do. Sometimes people believe that real faith

should always result in some dramatic outcome. Our culture is too ready to make superior productivity stand as the primary measure of our value in the world.

I always try to understand Jesus' words in the context of his whole life, message, and ministry. From that perspective, it does not appear to me that Jesus wants us to feel guilty if we are not producing enough to measure up to such a high standard. I think it is more accurate to say that the responsibility for productivity, or fruitfulness if you prefer, belongs to God. We might say that the power of God somehow expands, extends, and multiplies even our smallest contributions to life. The tiny mustard seed uses that belief as a foundation for its faithful action in the present.

Clearly there is much that needs to be done in our world, so it is important that we understand both the extent and the limitations of our responsibility. As a member of the generation that is handing this world on to the young, I confess that I feel a deep embarrassment. I am horrified by what my generation has done to the quality of the environment on this planet. I am horrified by the level of debt that is being handed over to the generation just coming into power. I am horrified by the ethical example we have set that seems to rely so completely on violence and threatening behaviors as the primary method to deal with world challenges. And I am horrified by how ready my generation always seems to be to identify someone else to take the blame rather than taking responsibility for the quality of our own lives and existence.

I sometimes wonder how this could have happened. It actually may be that we have made things worse because years ago we came to believe that we should have been able to fix it all, that all of our tiny mustard seeds should have grown big enough to fix the problems of the world. But, enough of groveling in embarrassment.

The question before us is how we can unleash the faithful power of the mustard seed. It won't surprise you to hear that I have some ideas about that question.

So, here are my recommendations:

1. No matter what your age or situation in life, always be involved in learning. The only way to be alive is to be learning and growing. There are some things, however, that get in the way of learning. Probably the most dangerous factor is that which we already know. If we think we already know the answers to life's most significant questions then we will never ask the important questions that are necessary to move us to a deeper understanding.

2. Just as a tree needs the nourishment that comes from the ground, so your spirit needs nourishment. The older you get the more it falls to you to take responsibility for your own nurturance. Beyond the most basic ways that you already know for taking care of yourself, I suggest that you attend carefully to entering into healthy relationships, that you participate as fully as you can in your community (both your civic community and your spiritual community), and that you don't forget how nurturing worship can be for you.

3. I would further encourage you to learn mindfulness. Mindfulness is a Buddhist idea that is completely consistent with Christian spirituality. It means paying attention to what is going on around you as well as what is going on within you. It means living fully in the present.

In my counseling practice I have observed time and time again that people suffer the most when they live their lives either in the past, trying to make up for something that has already happened, or in the future trying to make life turn out the way they think it should be. While those may sound like good ideas, I have come to believe that they are fundamentally impossible. The only place that life can be lived is in the present. This does not mean, however, that you should avoid making plans. A word of wisdom that comes from the world of 12-step programs describes how important it is to learn to "plan plans not results". A good plan is well thought out; it has access to appropriate resources, and it can be changed at any time in the light of newly available information.

4. And finally remember that life is always a risk. There is no possibility of removing the fundamental risks of life. But many addictive substances, behaviors, and beliefs (even religious beliefs) will try to convince you that you can be perfectly in control. Jesus has a great deal to say about taking risks. In many places he talks about the necessity to let go of one thing in order for something greater to come into being. Even in the image of the mustard seed, we must see that the seed has to fall into the ground and lose its identity as a seed in order to grow into its fuller identity as a tree. It is a central Christian belief that we are created in the image of God, so the purpose of our primary task in growing and learning is to be in the process of become our most true selves. We can never get there completely, but the journey turns out to be more important than the ending.

You might wonder how to evaluate if you are growing towards your divine identity or away from it. One measure of progress is how you go about finding meaning in life. If you can engage in creativity, if you can appreciate the beauty that comes from divine and human creativity, and if you can have healthy relationships, then, I believe you are moving in the right direction.

May God go with you as you continue your journey. May Christ convince you of the magnitude of God's love for you all along the way.

And May the Holy Spirit provide the energy for your growth into fullness.