

Mission Possible
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
The Rev. Jennifer M. Gingras
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2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17; Mark 4:26-34

In 1972, this church was in a financial bind. They had just stepped out in faith to build a new structure to house a growing Sunday school just a few years before. In order to complete it, for the first time ever, they took out a mortgage on a portion of the \$185,000 Rexford House project.

So a few of those church folks decided to try and generate some income by selling strawberry pies. As the story has been told to me, Jim Davidson drove around town, picking up fresh homemade pies baked by church members that he sold out the back hatch of his station wagon. That first year, they made about a thousand dollars and were able to pay a few months of the mortgage.

The next year, a few other members decided to talk to a farmer in Shelton (Jones Farms) about picking some berries so that they might sell strawberry shortcake after church on Father's Day weekend. They made 500 biscuits that first time. Some were nervous that they made too much. Others held onto the hope that they would sell out. And wouldn't you know it? They did. The recipe for the biscuit came from Sue Zaleha, who worked in the kitchen of one of the elementary schools. Just yesterday, this community baked and assembled 1600 shortcake. The same perfect recipe is still used today.

In the third year, June Wilkes looked out over at the green we share with St. Peter's, got together with a couple of friends and organized the space for some local crafters to sell their wares. Today it is a juried event, because we want to offer customers the best buying experience. You will find high quality, hand-made merchandise at reasonable prices offered by the most gifted of artisans. Other areas have been added throughout the years thanks to the creativity, energy and drive of church members.

When I think of how the Strawberry Festival came to be, I can't help but think of the parable of the mustard seed.

Over the years, I've learned that there is a pattern to the way things go this weekend. The faith we hold in our community, in each other, has a way of starting small...

We begin wondering in March if we will have enough rain and sun on the fields – do we have faith that Mother Nature will do her thing? Given the long, cold, wet winter we’ve just experienced it’s an understandable concern.

Then we start wondering about our volunteers. Will the community do what it does best: show up, work hard, get along, share some laughs and be good hosts? Will we be able to pull it off another year?

Of course, there are many other worries we juggle, but you get the drift, don’t you? It’s a pattern every spring for us: our hope in each other starts tiny and ends big.

Some years we sell out of biscuits, and some years the weather disappoints. Through it all, we hold each other’s hope as we learn again to trust in each other. At the end of the day, God takes what starts off small in us, and uses it to do great things in our church, our community, and the world that we love.

The peculiar thing about main symbol in this parable is that mustard, in the middle east, is considered pesky and dangerous.

Why? Because wild mustard is so hardy and resilient, it is notoriously difficult to control. Once it takes root it will take over as much of the planting area as it can. You’d never even find it in a garden in the ancient world; it’s more likely to be overtaking the side of a hill or an abandoned field.

So pick your favorite garden-variety (*pun intended*) invasive plant species: crabgrass, dandelion, mint, what have you... that’s pretty much what Jesus is comparing the kin-dom of God to.

When we look at it that way, Jesus’ parable becomes a little more ominous. As John Dominic Crossan puts it:

*The point, in other words, is not just that the mustard plant starts as a proverbially small seed and grows into a shrub of three or four feet, or even higher, **it is that it tends to take over where it is not wanted**, that it tends to get out of control, and that it tends to attract birds within cultivated areas where they are not particularly desired. And that, said Jesus, was what the Kingdom was like: not like the mighty cedar of Lebanon and not quite like a common weed, [more] like a pungent shrub with dangerous takeover properties. Something you would want in only small and carefully controlled doses -- if you could control it.¹*

¹ *The Historical Jesus*, pp. 278-279

Maybe that IS the point: this kin-dom Jesus proclaims isn't something we can control. Neither is this weekend, try as we might! (sorry co-chairs!) This kin-dom is definitely not safe, if we're even minimally satisfied with the way things are. This is because it comes to overturn, to take over, to transform the domains and divisions of this world.

So if you're not satisfied with the world around you,
if you can imagine something more than the status quo
of scarcity and fear and limited justice
and all the rest of this nonsense we're regularly fed,
then maybe Jesus reminding you that God's kin-dom is infiltrating our world
will inspire you to work toward the vision of peace and justice he proclaims.

Hope is like that, you see -- it doesn't just cheer you up, it moves you to act with courage and love.

How many of you have seen the movie *The Hunger Games*? There's this scene (not in the book, but fits the story beautifully) in which President Snow, the totalitarian ruler of futuristic Panem, asks his chief Games-maker (the one charged with creating a spectacle as entertaining as it is barbaric) why the Hunger Games must have a winner.

The games-maker's answer? *Hope*. He wants to give the oppressed people of Panem hope that maybe, just maybe, the odds will be in their favor this time around. Maybe this will be the year they win the Hunger Games and escape their life of servitude. "*Hope*," the Games-maker explains, "*is the only thing more powerful than fear.*"

"*A little hope*," President Snow responds, "*is effective; a lot of hope is dangerous.*"

Church... I've got a summer mission for you, should you dare to accept it. I think all of you can do this... from our youngest Sunday school students to our elders.

And here it is: Look for those places where God's kin-dom is sneaking in, or spreading out, or taking over little corners of our world.

Go out and look for hope. Not the sunshiney-kumbayah hide-our-heads-in-the-sand kind of hope, but the dangerous hope that transforms people's lives in the here and now, in unexpected ways both small and large.

Seek those places where God's kin-dom is infiltrating this world,
or the people who God is using to create hope,
or a scene in which you sense God at work,
even though it might not be obvious to the rest of us.

Not just today, although the Strawberry Festival will give you PLENTY of
opportunity to see the kin-dom of God if you're looking.

Then take a picture and send it to me; along with a few words of why it
gives you hope.

Your mission begins right now and it continues throughout the summer.
Maybe by September we'll have gathered a harvest of pictures that reflect
the wild, uncontrollable, but oh-so-useful mustard seed Jesus is talking
about here.

And before we scatter to the four winds of Strawberry Festival, let me say...
you are one of the things in this world that gives me hope, MCC. Your
tireless labor helps the kin-dom seep into the hearts and lives of the people
who look to you. When community comes together to love and to serve,
amazing things and life-transforming moments happen. Thank you for that
... and for so much else. Amen.