

“The Strength of a Seed and the Persistence of a Weed”

Mark 4:26-34

Pastor Liz Miller

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On Monday I spent the day in Detroit with Kris Wisniewski and several hundred other people for the final Monday of the Poor People's Campaign. This is the national campaign that has been happening over the last 40 days to bring awareness to the many different sides of poverty: education, the justice system, racism, children and women, environmental inequity, and water issues. Each Monday in state capitals and major cities there have been rallies, marches, and carefully planned acts of civil disobedience echoing the legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's first Poor People's Campaign fifty years ago.

Last Monday we first gathered in a church to sing songs, hear the plan for the day, and to listen to speakers give voice to why we had been called together. One of the clergy speakers, and unfortunately I can't remember her name, mentioned Jesus' parable of the mustard seed. She reminded us that the small mustard seed grows into a giant weed. It is a plant that spreads and spreads and spreads, no matter how hard you try to get rid of it. Even when you think you've torn it out, it keeps spreading and getting into places you'd rather it not go.

I've been holding this image of a mustard seed faith in my head and heart this week. The mustard seed is a story that illustrates what the Kingdom or kin-dom of God is like. That is, it tells us something about how our world would be if justice was enacted for all people, if love was the law of the land, and if everyone lived with hope for peace in their lives and their communities. I thought about the mustard seed as I was glued, along with many of you, to the stories of families and unaccompanied minors seeking asylum at our southern border. The images

and sounds of the cruelty and pain that they experienced and continue to experience has left American citizens shell-shocked as we lift the veil to realize how little we know about the experience of immigrants and asylum seekers.

This is a critical justice issue in our country and while many of us were made aware of the gravity of the issue for the first time in the last few weeks, it is not a new issue. Beth has a friend who is an immigration lawyer in Austin, Texas, and when Beth reached out this week to check on her, she learned that she works at The Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services – the same organization that has been in the news a whole lot for their good work and leadership.

Her friend said that for the last four years massive amounts of families and unaccompanied kids have been fleeing violence in Central America. For four years the government has built privately run family detention centers and big foster homes for the unaccompanied children and youth – neither of which is a pleasant solution. Because our immigration courts are still largely a paper-based system, paperwork gets routinely lost and officials are able to skirt the Flores Settlement Agreement, the policy that says minors can only be detained for 20 days, meaning these children and youth often end up being detained in detention centers for much longer than 20 days. What we saw these past few weeks with Trump's new policy of dividing families simply moved us down the scale from really bad to worse.

Trump's new practices became the tipping point for public response and outrage, but to really enact justice, we need to move the scale *way* back to find a way to treat these asylum seekers with compassion and mercy instead of punishment and distrust. These are parents and children for whom leaving their homes was their only option if they were to have a possibility of a life without violence and fear. These are parents and children coming from places where the violence they have experienced has often been directly and indirectly linked to the actions of our

government in the United States, cooperating and corroborating with their governments. Even before the asylum seekers reach Texas or Arizona, we have been bound together and complicit with the violence that forced them to flee their homes.

The tipping point that we have reached this week is our mustard seed. The anger and pain we felt rise up in us over inhumane and unjust practices is our mustard seed of faith being planted. Although it feels visceral in this moment, it is still relatively small when we compare how these stories have captured our attention for a week while others like immigration lawyers and advocates have been working for change for years. This week – as our eyes opened to pain and trauma beyond our own personal experience – we were given the opportunity to plant our mustard seed.

When we plant a seed, a few things can happen. If you are a gardener like me, you water it vigorously for the first few days, anxiously looking for signs of green shoots coming out of the earth, but then just as quickly you get distracted and forget to water the seeds you planted. A week passes and you go to check on the seeds, to see if they can be revived, but the seedlings are either dead or struggling, and you go back inside defeated, wondering why you tried to garden at all.

If you are a more experienced gardener, you will water more faithfully. This does not mean committing to watering every single day, but it means paying attention to the weather forecast and letting Mother Nature water the seeds with you so that you pace your energy. In this way you are a part of a wider team to ensure the seeds get the nutrients they need. Paying attention to the weather forecast also means committing to going outside to water in the evening after the morning's forecast that promised rain never came true because this is Michigan and the weather is predictably unpredictable. When one part of the team is unable to care for the seeds, another part steps in.

If you are a master gardener, like some of you here are, you do more than water the seeds and hope for good luck. Master gardeners know the ph. balance needed in the soil to provide optimal growing conditions for the seeds. They know what else to plant nearby to help them grow stronger together. They know the signs of disease to watch for and the bugs to ward off to better protect their seeds. We're not all going to be master gardeners, but luckily those who are often love to teach and lead more novice gardeners. Some of our master gardeners have even been known to very politely but persistently remind me that my plants need watering.

This week a mustard seed has been planted, but Jesus's parable does not stop with the seed being planted. The seed must then grow. It needs to be watered and fed in order to have the strength and tenacity to grow strong. Once it does, a mustard seed becomes a large plant, and it acts like a weed – breaking out of its designated spot, disrupting the order of the garden, and emerging in every nook and cranny you see. The tiny mustard seed becomes a mustard plant that is a large nuisance.

And this is what the kingdom of God is like. We are called to grow strong in our faith so that we can disrupt the order of the way things are or the way they've always been. We have to interject our love and justice seeking even where it is not wanted. We have to appear and reappear, refusing to die off or go away, until God's love and justice for all people has taken over the systems that create insiders and outsiders, citizens and immigrants, obedient rule followers and desperate asylum seekers.

This week a mustard seed has been planted about the crisis at our nation's borders. We have responded with our whole hearts this week in a way that has demonstrated that it is possible for collective compassion to sway the powers that be. In order for long-term change to occur we need to care for this seed, to keep paying attention, and to keep working to make it grow. We cannot be distracted by the next headline or scandal. To love our neighbor means we keep

advocating after the news cameras go home.

We must not rest when we move our immigration practices and policies back to the way they have been the last four years – that is still bad. We were outraged when it was worse, but we must not settle for bad. Too many lives hang in the balance. Too many lives are dependent on our compassion and our willingness and ability to grow into a strong weed that brings change to law makers and detention centers and places of power. We must continue to cultivate our mustard seed faith until those who flee violence are able to find a place of refuge and safety.

This week our church school kids have been living out the Kingdom of God through their mustard seed faith. One of our kiddos, Luci, saw the news of families being separated and was upset. So with her mom's encouragement she decided to do something about it. She and the rest of the Sunday school are across the building right now making signs and preparing tables for a post-church bake sale. The proceeds will go to those immigration lawyers who have been the mustard weeds working to change the unjust systems for years. Before the bake sale has even begun I think they've raised over \$500. For Luci and the other kids, this will become a memorable moment. One they will look back on as an example of how to work for change and how to strengthen your faith through action.

For those of us who are just learning about asylum seekers and immigration, we have more work to do. In what can only be considered God's timing, our Justice & Peace Ministry Team has been working for the past few months to create opportunities for us to learn more about immigration. They are the master gardeners who saw what an important issue this is and how much work needed to be done. So in two weeks, on Sunday July 8th, we will welcome a guest preacher, Rev. Justo Gonzalez, along with two young men who are Dreamers, who will share their stories and realities of being undocumented immigrants. The following evening, Monday July 9th, we are hosting a short documentary about DACA – the Defense Against Child Arrivals,

and will speak with the filmmaker and the two Michigan State students featured in the documentary. These are important opportunities to grow our mustard seed faith, to help us grow the roots to keep us anchored in seeking justice for all people, especially those most affected by violence and trauma.

On Monday in Detroit, I mentioned that we sang songs. A good song gets stuck in your head and becomes a reminder of the work that we are called to do even after you've gone home for the day. I want to teach you one of the songs we sang so we can carry it home with us, helping us to water our mustard seed faith and help it grow into tenacious weeds. You know I'm not a singer, but mustard seed faith is about going into places where you might be a little uncomfortable, so I hope you will sing with me.

Somebody's hurting my family

And it's gone on far too long

Yes it's gone on far too long

I tell you It's gone on far too long

Somebody's hurting my family

And it's gone on far too long

And we won't be silent anymore

(hurting the children, poisoning the water)