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Date: July 5, 2015
Sermon Title: The Seeds of Faith
Pastor: Rachel Baumann and Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Matthew 13:31-32

Matthew 13:31-32

He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.'

Rachel's message

Let me try some Spanish on you. "Podran cortar todas las flores, pero no podran detener la primavera." This is one of my favorite lines from the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. "You can cut all the flowers," he writes, "but you cannot keep spring from coming." It sounds even more beautiful in Spanish.

What are the hidden meanings in Neruda's poem? Some might even translate it into a 21st century line that I could really do without: "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

We say these types of things a lot, don't we? "Look on the bright side." Silver linings become clichéd. We toss around phrases that we think will help a person in need, a person suffering, but do we ever stop and really think about what we are saying?

At the end of the day, the language we have to support one another does not always do the trick. Perhaps you've had a tragedy in your family recently, or perhaps you've just witnessed the passing of a close friend. In these moments, the spring that Neruda alludes to in his poem does not seem to be in sight. Sometimes, it does not even seem attainable. I am not suggesting, of course, that words are not helpful. Quite the contrary. I think words, prayer, literature, music, and all the meaning that comes from the arts can help people in the darkest of times. Sometimes the best art is created from our darkest moments and can be seen as resistance

to the difficult situations people find themselves in. Consider slave songs and spirituals. Or the literature and testimony from Holocaust survivors.

As the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, I have seen firsthand the importance of documenting such experiences. Of being a witness to the suffering of others. Words *can* save people. But we should treat words as we would our wounded friends. Carefully. With tenderness.

You might be wondering what this has to do with today's Scripture, "The Parable of the Mustard Seed." The Scripture is a beautiful one, ripe with metaphors and similes and ideas that do offer us hope. When listening to the parable, your mind might not jump to doubt. To uncertainty. Isn't it about starting with as much faith as you can muster? Trusting that with one seed, something beautiful can be created?

Yet, I would argue that with that seed of faith comes a lot of doubt. I might even say that faith and doubt come hand in hand. Faith and doubt look like the moment when you don't know what to say to your friend who is in pain.

Some of you may know of Christian Wiman, professor at Yale Divinity School and former editor of *Poetry* magazine. In his book about becoming a poet, he wrote, "Nature poets can't walk across the backyard without tripping over an epiphany." Let me repeat that: "*Nature poets can't walk across the backyard without tripping over an epiphany.*"

We planted 6,855 flags two weekends ago to honor each of our brave soldiers who lost their lives in war far away. We also honor the 52,000 wounded in action. We could not have done that without each and every member of this community who contributed. We created something big by starting small, just as the "Parable of the Mustard Seed" suggests. A simple concept, I know, but I think we sometimes overlook how far even the smallest effort can go.

Let us remember that the Kingdom of God referred to in the Scripture was not created overnight. It is still being brought into existence. It is *just beyond* our imagining. But it is also right here if we want it to be. That means it is not always A or B. We live in a world of multitudes, ambiguities. We spend most of our lives in the gray areas, and that is why I think we yearn for God. We yearn for that mustard seed of faith to develop into something we can use to better understand our lives. We yearn for the shadows to disappear and for there to be an opportunity to "dwell with the birds of heaven." We don't know what is going to happen when we plant one seed. We don't know what will happen when we simply show up at a grieving

spouse's house. We don't know what will happen if we put our trust in God. But where else should we place our trust?

And before we do that, we may also grapple with unbelief. Yes, unbelief. It takes work to question our beliefs—to be broken in a broken world and have that disbelief. It is often through unbelief, however, that we can find God and find our belief. It is often through our broken wounds that we can become a little more whole. In our most difficult moments, we must plant and re-plant and plant again the seeds of belief, so that we will be able to cling a little bit tighter to God. As the parable says, we must “sow” these seeds.

In order for the mustard seed to rise up, in order for it to flourish, in order to see the birds of the heaven dwell, we need to test ourselves, our faith, our God.

American novelist James Baldwin said, “You think *your* pain and *your* heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who had ever been alive.”

But I want to tell you—all of you—that your pain and your heartbreak matter. The things that torment you might not make sense or may be unfair and randomly distributed, but you are still allowed to grieve. There's no calculus to suffering. In fact, you are allowed to scream! You are still allowed to have doubt and keep asking questions. The fact that we're able to do just that, I would argue, connects us even closer to a life full of faith. It is unhealthy to hide our heartbreak.

Mark 9:24 helps us to understand our own doubts even more. A father, asking Jesus to help his son, cries out, “I believe; help my unbelief!” I think we are all frightened to admit moments of doubt, because there is a stigma that we would appear “un-Christian.” I think we should talk about our moments of doubt. The moments when we plant a seed and are doubtful that it will grow into anything. Isn't this, after all, what makes up most of life?

I want to tell you a story about a woman who believes in the power of language and reaching out to those who need our love. Designer Emily McDowell was diagnosed with Stage III Hodgkin's lymphoma at age 24. She is now 38 and has been cancer free for many years. She has created what are called “Empathy Cards,” and I urge you to go look her up online as soon as you leave church. She said the most difficult part of her illness was “not

losing her hair or being erroneously called 'sir' by Starbucks baristas, or sickness from chemo." It was, she said, "the loneliness and isolation I felt when many of my close friends and family members disappeared because they didn't know what to say, or said the absolute wrong thing without realizing it."

These Empathy Cards for Serious Illness have been a godsend. One reads, for example, "I'm really sorry I haven't been in touch. I didn't know what to say." This card doesn't hide anything; it just expresses the plain truth that sometimes, words fail us. Another says, "I'm so sorry you're sick. I want you to know that I will never try to sell you on some random treatment I read about on the Internet." And the most popular seems to be, "Please let me be the first to punch the next person who tells you everything happens for a reason. I'm sorry you're going through this."

You might ask why these cards are so insanely popular? I think they describe the sometimes forbidden space between someone you care about who is sick and yourself—if you are healthy. It is difficult to know what to say to someone if you yourself have not gone through something similar. It is not that people don't want to help. On the contrary, I think we would *like* to support our family and friends as much as possible. But we must acknowledge the gap between sufferer and listener. Between sick person and healthy person, between war veteran and civilian, between the happily married and the friend struggling with a divorce. Between a person who is feeling doubt and the one who seems to have all the faith from the garden with the mustard seed.

Chances are someone who has just been diagnosed with a terrible illness or has lost her job or is enduring a heartbreak does *not* want to hear that it is all happening for a reason.

Some of us are born with the capacity to empathize with those who are struggling. Although I believe there are some experiences that we simply cannot imagine, I still think we have a moral duty and obligation to *try*. I am not saying we will be able to lessen the suffering, but we must express solidarity. We live in a society that encourages individualism, and that can be isolating—especially for those who are sick, for those who are grieving, for those who are barely holding on. These are the moments we must use our faith to sit with those in doubt about God's goodness and justice. And if we have doubt, we must use that, too. Because doubt and faith are so intertwined, we cannot have one without the other. Just as we cannot face our struggles alone. We must rely on one another.

So, I think we should sometimes embrace darkness a little bit more, with the hope that the seeds we plant will eventually turn into something. I think we should embrace the only Psalm that does not end in hope—Psalm 88—
“Darkness is my only companion.”

To live a life of faith and a life with God and a life with others in community, I think, is to live a life of questions. To live with God takes effort. It means planting the mustard seeds over and over again and being O.K. when some of them don't bloom. Yet, we do not need to face the darkness alone. The darkness can be our companion, because God is there too, even when we think he is most absent. Part of this involves giving the proper amount of time for the spring to come, for the mustard seeds we planted to turn into something, for our faith in God to grow, to wane, but to grow again.

Maybe you can't yet fully believe in the “Kingdom of God.” I am saying we have to try to imagine it. And in order to imagine it, we must be open to the Kingdom that God is still creating right here on earth. It begins with how we treat one another—our loved ones and those who need our loving. This act of faith must continue every moment of our days.

Should we believe those who say they have seen the mustard seed flower? I don't know. But I do know that we must ask one another more questions, we must question ourselves, and we must question God. And that, I believe, is living a life of faith.

David's message:

Last Sunday at our early service, Don Lord gave a magnificent sermon. He called it, “Is God In Control?” It was brilliant, thoughtful, personal, intimate, humorous, and he was dealing with the same important issue that Rachel did today: that intersection of faith and doubt; or wanting to believe and struggling to believe; of questions and answers and more questions.

I've always been intrigued by TV religion, all those televangelists. On my Cable TV it's channels 134-138. One Jewish channel, two Catholic channels, and two very fundamentalist Protestant channels. The one thing they have in common is certitude. They are always 100 percent certain about whatever they're saying and whatever they're telling you to do. On the fundamentalist channels, it mostly goes like this: You can get rid of your cancer . . . you can find the money to pay your rent . . . you can save your marriage . . . you can find a job . . . you can get a husband . . . IF you have faith in God. And the way you prove that you have absolute faith in God is to send us \$45 a month, and then God will know you're serious. Then God will be serious, and you'll get everything you need. Welcome to reality!

What Rachel today, and Don Lord last week, have in common is the willingness to face doubt with faith, to look for faith in the midst of doubt. Rachel chose three Scriptures. None of them is filled with certitude. Psalm 88 says everything is darkness, everything is bleak. Seriously, here are key verses from Psalm 88:

My soul is full of trouble . . . you have put me in the lowest pit . . . I am repulsive to my friends . . . Why, O Lord, do you reject me . . . this darkness is my closest friend." You don't think he's got some doubts?

And then there's the dad with a sick son. He goes to Jesus for help, and Jesus asks him point-blank, "Do you believe?" That might be a good time to fake it, but the dad refuses to pretend. With everything on the line, he says, sheepishly, haltingly, "I believe . . . help mine unbelief." "I believe a bit. I believe a little. I'm trying to believe. I'm working on it . . . but it's hard. Help mine unbelief."

And Rachel's Scripture for today, the "mustard seed" Scripture, says, well, "a little is O.K., a little is a good start. We can work with that. We can grow from there."

I was at a bookstore on Wednesday. I bought a book, *This I Believe*. Right next to it was a book by Sam Harris, a leading author of atheism. One author is trying hard not to believe; one author is trying hard to believe. That's the choice for everybody, isn't it? To work on believing or to work on not believing.

You came to church this morning. Not everything went right for you this week. Not everything in your life is perfect, but you came to church this morning. You chose to work on believing, even if all you have is a teeny itsty bitsy mustard-seed sized faith. You chose to work on it.

Yesterday, July 4th, I did an early morning walk around Westport, ending up at their Veterans' Memorial. It features a most profound, thoughtful statue of a soldier, in full battle fatigues, with a sort of downward look to his eyes, as if thinking, wondering. We look out our church windows at almost 7,000 American flags, almost 7,000 names on the board, almost 7,000 soldiers who died in Afghanistan or Iraq.

How many times must they have looked like that Westport statue: battle weary, remembering friends, thinking about this or that . . . wondering? And then they took a deep breath, dug down deep inside themselves, and, as the saying goes, "soldiered on."

That's our daily challenge, isn't it? Every day, no matter what gives us pause, no matter what confronts us, no matter what questions or doubts come to mind, we "soldier on." We say even in our darkest hour, "I believe at least a little bit. I believe so small it seems like a mustard seed, but I do believe that much, help mine unbelief."

And God says, "O.K., that's a start. Let's see what we can do."