

“What Makes Things Grow Anyway?”

- I. Introduction: What makes things grow, anyway . . . things like mustard plants and children and churches and our faith? What makes things grow? As I pondered this question prompted by the apostles’ request to Jesus to increase their faith, I remembered a story from my childhood about growing things. Behind my grandmother’s house was a beautiful vegetable garden. It was owned by the friendly, smiling man who lived in the house behind hers. He was an elderly man who had been born in Italy and moved to this country as a young boy. His most prized possession of all the many vegetables that grew in his garden were his large, red, juicy tomatoes. The neighbors from all around coveted those tomatoes and hoped that he would share some with them. And he did, because he was a generous man. Everyone said his tomatoes were the best example of what we called “Jersey tomatoes.” And it was common knowledge that “Jersey tomatoes” are the best tomatoes in the whole world.

But these tomatoes didn’t start in New Jersey. This man’s mother had brought tomato plant seeds with her when they had come many years before from Italy. And each year he would take some seeds from his best tomatoes, dry them in the sun, and save them to be planted the following spring. I remember he used to proudly show me these seeds before he stored them away for the winter. My elderly friend treated those seeds very carefully because he knew that they contained new life. Then when spring came he carefully planted the seeds, watered them regularly, pulled the weeds in the garden, and put sticks in the ground to support the vines. I could see that he understood and had great respect for the growing process. There were many beautiful plants that grew where I lived, but it’s the tomatoes I remember the best – I can still taste them as I describe them to you. It has often struck me that some of my most powerful evocative memories are about ordinary things.

- II. Jesus often used quite ordinary images in his teaching. The pictures that he painted in his parables used symbols that his listeners could readily understand. Those ordinary images, like the mustard plant, would help his listeners comprehend the spiritual intent of his stories. Sometimes the meaning Jesus would have his followers take from these stories is clearer to us than at other times. For example, it is clear that the mustard seed was very small, so it is easy for us to see that Jesus was teaching about how even a small amount of faith when acted upon can have a large spiritual impact.

But what may be less clear to us is that, in the mustard seed, Jesus picked what might have seemed to his apostles like an odd example. The mustard plant was a humble plant. In other scriptural passages it is referred to as a tree, but it wasn't a tree at all. It was in fact a bush and viewed by many as an undesirable weed. According to the scholar Dominic Crossan, Jewish law forbid the planting of mustard plants in gardens. Jesus appears to have been using an example of an outcast plant just as he often used examples of outcast people.

- III. The power of faith. We have to assume that Jesus wanted his listeners to comprehend the profound importance and power of ordinary faith. We are to understand that the faith we have within us through the power of the Holy Spirit is electrically dynamic, and that we are to act on that faith even though we may not yet have experienced its fullness.

In Luke, the apostles asked Jesus to increase their faith, to make it bigger and to make it grow faster. They had watched Jesus perform miracles, drive out demons, and attract large crowds. They had witnessed the dynamic power of Jesus Christ, and they wanted to tap into that power. Now they had rightly understood that faith and power go together. Essentially they were saying, Jesus, increase our faith – do it for us. They wanted their faith to be strengthened by an external source. They were asking to get zapped!

Now sometimes we do indeed get zapped by God, but by and large our faith is not energized by periodic infusions of lightning-like power. Jesus made that point when he gave them a lesson in faith biology: “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree be uprooted and planted in the sea, and it will obey you.” Now, that's power. All you need is the tiniest amount of faith and you can talk to trees and they will do what you tell them to do.

What Jesus was teaching his disciples was critically important. Namely that they needed to own and use the faith they already had. It's not a matter of trying to get a bigger bag of faith. That's not it at all. First take the faith you already have, own it, and then boldly act upon it. Taking faith-based action is how the power of a Christ-centered life is experienced.

Unfortunately, many of us hold back and limit our activities to what we already know how to do. Our faith is intact, but untested and untried. But when we step out in faith to enlarge our territory as disciples, then we do new things that we may not be very confident about doing. This is where God meets us, on the edge of our comfort zone. This is where we apply our faith and this is where our faith comes alive with new energy.

IV. Conclusion: A Word of Encouragement about Faith. I know from my own personal experience that stepping out in deeper faith is often very uncomfortable. It can be uncomfortable for us as individual believers and it can be uncomfortable for faith communities. Partly that's because stepping out requires us to take action when we are not able to predict or control the outcome of our risk-taking -- whether it's engaging in sacrificial giving to God's work, becoming a Stephen Minister, becoming a Daughter of the King, or a youth group leader. Faith-based risk-taking always takes us beyond our comfort zones. And if you are like me, when I'm outside of my comfort zone I become tempted to rely upon myself rather than on God. That's when I can begin to get into trouble. In contrast, the challenge of mustard seed faith is to be willing to take risks and trust that God will meet us in the new space we enter.

A final thought: The idea of untapped power is in the metaphor of the seed – the tiny mustard seed has within it all that it needs to produce a large plant. Similarly, we ordinary disciples of Christ have in our faith all that is needed to achieve miraculous things. Jesus is urging us to act on that faith, trusting it will be sufficient to do what Christ calls us to do.

But we must also remember that our faith, like the tiny mustard seed, must die unto itself in order to create new life. Like the seed, our faith will not germinate if it is contained tightly within a dry, safe envelope. It has to get dirty in the soil, it has to get wet, and it has to send out new roots. We have to be willing to be mustard seed risk-takers. May God give us the grace to move mountains with our faith and live energy filled, rich lives as disciples of Jesus Christ. *AMEN.*