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Mustard Seed Faith

Matthew 13:31-32

Aldous Huxley once described a visionary experience he had while sitting on the seashore. He was half listening to a friend who was carrying on about a subject which bored him. As Huxley's mind began to drift he picked up a handful of sand. Suddenly he looked at the sand and saw something he had never noticed before. Huxley described that moment in these words:

I saw that each particle was made up of a perfect geometrical pattern, with sharp angles, from each of which a brilliant shaft of light was reflected, while each tiny crystal shone like a rainbow. Then, suddenly, I saw how the whole universe was made up of particles of material which, no matter how dull and lifeless they might seem, were nevertheless filled with this intense and vital beauty. For a second or two the whole world appeared as a blaze of glory. When it died down, it left me with something I have never forgotten and which constantly reminds me of the beauty locked up in every minute speck of material around us.

This capacity to see what others overlook is one of the most valuable gifts that a human being can possess. I remember a lanky junior high school kid I knew when I was growing up in Wichita, Kansas. This young man wanted to be a runner more than anything else in the world. But he was cut from the junior high track team because he lacked the raw speed necessary to impress the coach.

But he didn't give up. He kept running on his own. When he went to high school he went out for track again. And this time the discriminating eye of a more gifted coach saw the potential in that lanky kid. Within two years he became the first high school athlete to run a 4-minute mile. Within four years Jim Ryun was a world record holder in several distance events. He never would have accomplished any of those things except that a coach saw the potential that was buried deep within him and helped him believe in that potential.

The capacity to see what others overlook was at the heart of Jesus' ministry. He gathered around him a group of men with no qualifications in the eyes of the world. These men had no education and no achievements to their credit. They had no visible prospects for leadership in the world in which they lived. But Jesus saw in them a potential that no else perceived. He empowered them to believe in themselves in a way that no one could have dreamed possible. By the time he finished with them they became the most powerful force for spiritual and social change that the world has ever seen.

Jesus' vision of human potential is expressed in the parable of the mustard seed. It is one of the shortest of all the parables, but its truth is profound. "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all 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 (Matthew 13:31-32)."

This parable is Jesus' way of telling us not to be fooled by the way things are packaged. The seeds are unimpressive to anyone who looks at them. One hundred and eighty thousand individual mustard seeds can easily fit into a small aspirin bottle. Jesus was saying to his followers, "don't focus on the minute appearance of the seeds. Concentrate instead upon their potential for being transformed into impressive trees." What Jesus saw in his disciples was not their lack of education, or their lack of political connections, or their lack of social cultivation and charm. He saw their potential to become the greatest spiritual force in the history of the world. That potential was no more visible than a tiny mustard seed.

Jesus spoke again of mustard seed faith in the seventeenth chapter of the gospel of Matthew. There we read of a man who comes to Jesus asking to have a demon cast out of his son. He complains that Jesus' disciples have been completely ineffective in their attempts to cure the boy. After Jesus takes care of the problem his disciples come to him in their frustration. They want to know why they failed. Then Jesus reminds them of the parable of the mustard seed, "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there, and it will move (Matthew 17:20).'"

Jesus was not challenging his followers to enter the earth-moving business. He was using a colloquial expression which had deep meaning for his listeners. He was saying to them and to us that through faith all our difficulties can be met creatively. Faith in God is the instrument which enables you to deal with the mountains of difficulty which block your path.

The promise of mustard seed faith is that ordinary people can be transformed and in turn have a transforming effect on the world around them. More than a year before Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence a group of Presbyterians from Mecklenburg County, North Carolina gathered together to express their dissatisfaction with British rule in America. Their families had left Ireland because of the economic and religious persecution directed at Presbyterians by British authorities in that country. By 1775 some of the same issues were beginning to emerge in America. When the Vestry and Marriage Act of 1769 imposed fines on Presbyterian ministers who conducted marriage ceremonies, the Scots-Irish were reminded of how the Irish courts had ruled that their grandparents were living in sin because a Presbyterian minister performed the marriage.

On the day before this gathering of Presbyterians, a rider arrived from Massachusetts with the news of the bloodshed at Lexington and Concord the previous month. The Presbyterians knew that they were not alone in their grievances against the British. But they also understood that they were a frontier settlement on the edge of the British Empire. Some believed that there was nothing that people like them could do that could make any difference. But in the end mustard seed faith prevailed and the Presbyterians issued a statement that came to be called the Mecklenburg Declaration. It said:

We the citizens of Mecklenburg County do hereby dissolve the political bonds which have connected us to the mother country...We do hereby declare ourselves a free and independent people...to the maintenance of which independence, we solemnly pledge to each other our mutual cooperation, our lives, our fortunes, and our most sacred honor."

This statement was a declaration of war from people who had no reason to believe that they could succeed. Some of the language of this statement would in the next year be echoed in the Declaration of Independence and the world would indeed be changed (George Will, July 2008 article

in *The Washington Post*). No one could have predicted the impact of what these backwoods Presbyterians said and did. God saw in them a potential that was hidden to the eyes of the world.

Like the disciples of Jesus and the Presbyterian revolutionaries of Mecklenburg County, we are unlikely candidates for influencing the direction of our world. But God sees in this room potential that no one else will notice. You may think your faith is too small. But the God of the mustard seed will use whatever faith you have if you are willing to let it grow.