

Imagine you are headed into the Piggly Wiggly, either supremely self-satisfied at your progress through your errands, or – if you are like me – loathing this onerous job, but focused and preoccupied on the task at hand. Between the doors, in that space where they sell Christmas wreaths and fall mums and plastic pool toys, where you might meet a veteran selling poppies or Girl Scouts selling cookies or church folk selling pancake breakfast tickets, there is a man. His hair is long and he has a beard, his sandals are scruffy and – truthfully? – it looks like he’s been wearing the same clothes for awhile. He holds out his hand to you, looks you right in the eye and says, “I’d like to give you something.” Well...whatever you might be thinking, it is almost instinctive when someone proffers something to reach out and take it, so you do. He puts in your hand the teeniest, tiniest of seeds – exactly like the one you received this morning – and before you even have a chance to wonder what-in-the-world? he says, “This mustard seed is like the kingdom of heaven.”

I don’t know about you, but there would sure be a whirlwind of thoughts running through my head. Looking down at that eensy thing – no bigger than a speck of dirt – and now either stuck to the sweat of my palm or in one of the creases in my hand I would be wondering what I was supposed to do with it? Where do I put it? Am I supposed to save it? (After all, the kingdom of God may be at hand, but right this minute the kingdom of God is in my hand!) Undoubtedly the first word out of my mouth – as is my habit, much to my husband’s chagrin – would be my go-to word to express incredulity, amazement, and a hunger to know more...REALLY???

The parable of the mustard seed that we heard this morning is probably one of the most familiar parables for us. But one of the true gifts of the parables is that they are not neat, tidy little stories with a glaringly obvious moral or point. They are instead common and simple literary forms that are meant to make us hunger every time we hear them for more meaning – more understanding – more insight into the kingdom of God and our lives as part of the kingdom. We remember the bit about the little seed growing into the biggest of shrubs, and throughout our lives it gives us both comfort and confidence to know that we may be tiny parts of the kingdom and the cosmos but we are still valued in God’s sight. But why in the world do you suppose Jesus chose a mustard seed – of all the endless possibilities – to be the parable for God’s kingdom? And there you see a little twist, because the mustard seed – as the parable is told - is not each one of us, but the entire kingdom of God. And how often do we remember the final part of the parable...where the smallest of seeds grows into the largest of bushes so that the birds of the air can make their nests in its shade? When it comes to the mustard seed, we have a tendency to make the story fit our personal needs, and then don’t give it another thought – and we miss the point that the kingdom of God grows to provide shelter and safety for all of God’s creatures – human and otherwise...not just for those of us who come to church on Sunday.

The parables of Jesus are not proverbs. They don’t provide rules, they offer challenges. We often think the parables were simplistic, because that is all those unsophisticated folk could understand. But parables are, instead, incredibly complex in their simplicity – oftentimes turning our world upside down. (Remember the one about the last shall be first and the first shall be last? Or the one about the laborers who only worked an hour but earned the same wage as those who worked all day?) Parables are meant to make us think and wonder and be amazed, not just once but over and over

again. They are meant to make us question, and they are meant to keep us hungry...always exploring the depths and wandering the breadths of their simplicity. Parables were the way that Jesus taught all those whom he encountered. They weren't sound-bites, they were the message of the kingdom, spoken by God Incarnate. Surely we are meant to hunger and thirst after that message in our own lives as members of Christ's body, the church.

And so it is I come to you this morning, with the words of the parable of the mustard seed swirling in my mind and in my heart, pondering not so much the notion of small and large, insignificant and important, nor even shelter in the branches of God's kingdom. I am absorbed by the notion of hunger...hunger always to come closer to some sort of knowing of what it means to be a planter, a grower, of the seeds of God's kingdom on earth. Hunger to come closer to knowing God.

Blessed and privileged as we all are, trusting where our next meal is coming from, even we understand what it is to feel hungry. We may leave Steve's restaurant after an amazing meal, swearing we will never eat again...but we know that the next morning we will awake and feel hungry. Physiology dictates that what we take in will be processed for our bodies' function, and then will need to be replenished. We know, too, the feeling of emotional hunger. We have a longing – no matter how independent we consider ourselves to be – for community, connection, companionship. We know the hunger for self-worth...the need to be validated as having substance, desirability, something to contribute...both in the eyes of others and in our own view. We hunger to know more, and do more, and experience more, and often – alas –to own more. In one sense, we spend our entire lives striving to feed our many hungers, either consciously or unconsciously...always yearning, always seeking, to satisfy both our needs and our wants.

But what of our spiritual hunger? How often in the busyness of our lives do we stop long enough to consider the deep longing and hunger we have for relationship with God? Maybe today of all days – Fathers' Day – is an excellent opportunity to stop and consider...because we all had a dad, and undoubtedly they came in every variety of shape, size, and parenting skill. We are happy to claim the Father in heaven because we know God to be a father who loves us no matter what. Who sent the Son for our new creation, to bring us out of error into truth, to bring us out of sin into righteousness. A Father who gave us life and a promise to hold us in the palm of God's hand. Who made the mustard seed to grow into a shelter for all. Maybe not so easy was or is our relationship with our own dads. Yet even as toddlers, even as rebellious teenagers, even as world-weary adults – even, I would add, after our fathers have joined the Father in heaven – there was and is always a hunger within us for loving relationship with our very earthly fathers. Perhaps it bears considering that our relationship with God the Father deserves our attention – that hungering after the loving and caring and sorrowing Father of us all is truly what we are about. God is a Father we may not fully comprehend, but take for granted in our lives nonetheless.

How do we satisfy our spiritual hunger? Perhaps first by accepting the fact that it is a real hunger ever- present and ever-important in our lives as children of God. There was only One who in this earthly life was in full communion – full connection, full comprehension – with the Father. Maybe it is only at the promised heavenly banquet that our spiritual hunger will finally be fully fed. Yet we have been given this life we have in

the here and now for purpose and fulfillment. We seem to have been given the freedom to determine our own purpose and what we find fulfilling, and yet it is that spiritual hunger that keeps reminding us that God is at the center of it all. However serendipitously it may appear on the surface that we have all come to be here, together, on Sunday mornings, we are here not only to sing and pray, to listen and learn, to praise and to petition, but we are here to throw ourselves wide open and present our hunger to God. We are here not to show God how good we have been, but to take ourselves – humble and vulnerable and hungry – into God’s presence at the table and say, Good and Gracious Father, I am so empty and only you can feed me.

Father Richard Rohr’s meditations this week have been about the Eucharist. He says that “Eucharist is presence encountering presence” – God’s presence meeting our own. We come with nothing to prove, nor protect, nor to sell when we hold out our hands to receive...and it can feel a little naked when all we have to offer is our presence. But the Eucharist tells us that God is the food, and all we are asked to offer is our hunger. All we have to remember and to confess is that every day we are hungry – every day we must make room inside for another presence...the presence of God. When we are so full of our own opinions, our own ideas and righteousness and superiority and even sufficiency, we are a world unto ourselves and there is no room for another. Feeding our spiritual hunger – so gently and dramatically enacted at the table – is not about a good sermon or a favorite hymn or the right reading. It is simply and finally about knowing that there dwells within us a hunger after God – a hunger both created and fed, over and over again, by the one who created us all...by the God who imagined a seed so small that it could grow into a kingdom to shelter all of God’s beloved.

A most eloquent expression of this hunger and feeding – this meeting of the presence of God with our raw and frightened and vulnerable presence – is expressed in a communion hymn used often and with exuberance at Wartburg Seminary. I will read it to you, since to sing it would be less than eloquent! This hymn names the Eucharist “The Hungry Feast” and the words are these: We come to the hungry feast, hungry for the word of peace. To hungry hearts unsatisfied the love of God is not denied. We come, we come to the hungry feast. We come to the hungry feast, hungry for a world released from hungry people of ev’ry kind – the poor in body, poor in mind. We come, we come to the hungry feast. We come to the hungry feast, hungry that the hunger cease, and knowing, though we eat our fill, the hunger will stay with us: still, we come, we come to the hungry feast.

So come, come to the hungry feast this morning. And when the bread of the Eucharist is pressed into your outstretched hands – just as that little seed was pressed into your palm – accept it with wonder and with hunger...to open yourself to God’s grace and love in your life, now and forever.