

Sermon for Sunday, July 30, 2017
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

There's a song
sung by an Aboriginal singer in Australia
that tells the story
of the beginning of the land rights movement in Australia.
Back in 1788, when Captain Cook landed in Sydney Cove,
it was assumed that the land mass of Australia
was empty,
terra nullius
they called it.

Of course, they were wrong. The Australian aborigines
had been living on the land
for at least 50,000 years, some say as long as 100,000 years. But just as in other places
colonized by Europeans,
many Australian aborigines soon fell victim to disease, war, and perhaps most of all, the
loss of their land and as a result, of their traditional way of life.

Fast forward a century or a half.
Aborigines were living in missions — kind of like reservations — or cities or out in the
bush or on properties, ranches you would call them here.
And the ones working on those properties, were paid only their rations,
salt, beef, bread and tobacco,
for the healthy years of their lives
on land that was rightly their own.
Finally one of them, Vincent Lingiari of the Gurindji people,
decided he had had enough, enough of working on land that had belonged to his people,
just to make money for someone who had no right to that land.

He packed up their belongings and led the other workers
off the job,
a strike,
demanding better pay and conditions, and above all else, the right to return to their own
land.

Sixty years and a number of court cases later,

Australia has a Native Title Act
and many Aborigines have won the right to control of their ancestral land.
And the story of Vincent Lingiari
and the Gudjuri strike
has been immortalized in a song.

And the chorus of the song
goes like this:
“From little things
big things grow.
From little things
big things
grow.”

It’s a simple enough chorus, but one that contains
an enormous
truth.
Huge things
often have tiny
beginnings.

We’ve all heard of great success stories, people who began
with just a few dollars and a great idea
and ended up owning
a multi-million dollar conglomerate. People like Bill Gates, who began life as an
ordinary kid with a passion for computers, and has ended up
with a huge company and influence over computer users throughout the world. He’s the
epitome of the great American dream — the idea that anyone
can become anything
that they want.

But of course
we also know the reality.
For each person who has begun with a few dollars and a great idea, and ended up a major
business success,
there are a thousand others
who failed.
For every person like Vincent Lingiari
with a passion for seeing justice done
there are thousands discouraged

along the way.

Which is why, when we hear a parable like Jesus's one about the mustard seed, we tend to view it with a bit of healthy skepticism.

“You have a mustard seed? You think that if you plant it, it'll grow into a huge tree? Well think again.

Most likely

the birds will come and get the seed, before it even gets a chance to sprout. And if they don't, then the bugs will eat the leaves, and if they don't get it, the rabbits will, and there will be too much sun and too little rain or too much rain and too little sun, and that mustard seed won't have a chance.

At the very least, plant a couple of dozen, or even better, seeing how small a mustard seed is, about the size of the head of a pin, a couple of hundred, and maybe, just maybe, you'll get a plant or two. You've got to waste a fair bit of seed to be sure of a plant.”

But that's not the way

Jesus tells it.

His version

is far more positive. His mustard seed

is going to grow

not just into a regular old mustard plant, a few feet high but nothing compared to the trees around, his mustard seed

is going to become like a huge oak, grand beyond measure, shading generations of people who have met under its branches, and offering a safe haven for birds and wildlife of all types.

All that

from a mustard seed.

From little things

big things grow.

And the way Jesus sees it,

this is what the kingdom of God is like.

It begins small — as small as a group of twelve men

following their leader

through the middle eastern countryside,

stopping now and then
to dispense a word of wisdom
or place healing hands on a needy person.
But nothing you would expect
to change the world.

That's what the religious leaders thought, not long after Jesus's death,
that this was just a fad, a short lived movement
that would quickly die a natural death.

And so when the early Christians were brought before the religious leaders, charged with making trouble, a teacher called Gamaliel stood up and said, "Don't you remember? Not so long ago, Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and disappeared.

And then Judas the Galilean rose up at the time of the census and got people to follow him; he also died, and everyone who followed him were scattered. So now, leave these men alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail — but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them."

His argument convinced them — it simply wasn't worth bothering about these Christians — and so they left them alone. And left alone
that little group grew
and spread
and became what we know today
as the church, in all its denominations and communities.
And thousands, millions
of people
have found shelter in its arms,
and in the arms of God.

From little things
big things grow.

One hundred sixty four years ago,
a small group of people began meeting together here in St James
for worship.

A year later
they had raised enough money
to build this church.

And while they could never have dreamed
what the world would look like today,
let alone the church they founded -
they could not have imagined having a Eucharist each week,
or coffee hour,
or a food pantry,
the seed they planted
has grown beyond their imagination
to something that has been a blessing to countless people
over the years.

The same pattern
happens time and time again in the church.
Someone begins something.
And slowly
it gathers momentum
an eventually
becomes part of our life together.

Yesterday
the vestry went on our annual retreat.
We spent the day reflecting on who we are as a parish,
what we have done together these last ten years,
and where we are going.

One of the things we did together
was to interview each other.
The interview had questions about how we came to be part of the parish, what feeds us
spiritually, and what difference it makes in our lives.

We'd allocated half an hour to each interview, but we found we wanted to keep going!

We found out amazing things about how our parish works,
what we do well
and where, perhaps, we need to do better.

And a wonderful byproduct of the process
was that we got to know each other so much better,
and ended up in incredible conversations about our lives and faith.

But this is like the mustard seed. It isn't stopping with the vestry.
We want you all to be part of this, for it to grow to encompass
the whole of our parish.

We'll begin with each of the vestry members
interviewing two people, one they know well, and one they don't know well.
So don't be surprised if you get asked.

And then
we're asking each person who is interviewed
to then go and interview two other people.
And so on and so on
until all of us
have been apart of this.

Of course, you don't have to wait to be asked to participate.
Grab a couple of the interview sheets at the back of the church,
and interview someone else here in the parish.

All the interview sheets will be gathered up
and the vestry will look at what we all have shared about our lives and faith
and we'll use that
in our planning going forward.

And we hope that this process
will help us discern
where are we already
like that mustard seed tree,
large and leafy and where do we only have seeds, and need to nurture them and grow
them.

From little things
big things
grow.

The kingdom of heaven
is like a mustard seed...