

**Pentecost 3**  
**JUNE 13, 2021**  
**Calvary, Americus**

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When does confidence become arrogance?  
When does risk-taking become foolhardiness?

Think about that for a moment? Just how fine a line divides one from the other? Where is the safe middle ground?

When does our confidence become arrogance and our risk-taking become foolhardy? I am sure that each of us knows someone that will fall into one category or another.

There is a tension always present in the gospel between the action of grace (the initiative of God) and human action and responsibility.  
derivation of the word *Christian*? Naturally, it comes from Christ, but originally it was pejorative.

Have you ever wondered about the used in a diminutive form, *christianoii*, little Christs, little messiahs? What was pejorative in the beginning was appropriated by the new community as aptly fitting. They indeed were to be God's anointed in the world, and they did have a messianic mission to fulfill. Taking that mission seriously, with confidence and humility keeps us from becoming too arrogant on the one hand and too fool hardy on the other.

Parables are comparisons, meant to cast two things alongside one another to provide analogy, contrast, or reflection. Jesus' parables, whether they are brief aphorisms or short narratives, have a way of reordering conventional assumptions and values. They do not explain *how* one is supposed to recognize the reign of God, but they make it clear that we will need to adopt or receive new ways of perceiving.

The story of the mustard seed reads like a dense novella. At first glance, it reaffirms things people have already learned about God's reign: something exceedingly small will eventually morph into something much larger; also, something that appears obscure and insignificant will turn into something public and grand. Yet there is more: the reign of God will not just grow for the sake of looking pretty, but creatures will find that it provides them shelter and security.

Those are all important points, but they cannot capture the real energy in this parable. The parable's punch comes in at least two funny things Jesus says.

First, God's reign is not like any ordinary seed. In some ways it resembles a *mustard* seed. This is not the kind of crop most people would sow. Where Jesus lived, mustard was prolific like a common and sturdy weed. It could pop up almost anywhere and start multiplying. Some of Jesus' listeners must have groaned or chuckled. Imagine him speaking today of thistles or ground-ivy. But *bigger*. And more useful, since mustard has a range of medicinal qualities. In any case, the reign of God apparently is not much of a cash crop. Yet *it grows*. It is not easily eradicated. Good luck keeping it out of your well-manicured garden or your farmland. Better be careful what you pray for when you say, "Your kingdom come..."

Second, Jesus describes the fully grown mustard plant (probably *brassica negra* in Galilee) as "the greatest of all shrubs."<sup>1</sup> It can grow dense, but it is hardly magnificent. Jesus must be grinning as he speaks. He is not aiming to impart insights about the relative worth of

shrubberies but to shock people into a new way of perceiving greatness. The parable, therefore, depends on satire. Just as it reorients the image of birds and majestic trees in Ezekiel 17:23, so too it promises to upend a society's ways of enforcing stability and relegating everyone to their "proper" places. The reign of God will mess with established boundaries and conventional values. Like a fast-replicating plant, it will get into everything. It will bring life and color to desolate places. It will crowd out other concerns. It will resist our manipulations. Its humble appearance will expose and mock pride and pretentiousness.

In his letter this morning, Paul says: "we are always of good courage...we walk by faith, not by sight...we make it our aim to please the Lord."

What Paul is talking about is confidence, that sure and certain hope that the bible tells us about. This is not a passive waiting for deliverance from without; that would be a passive presumption; rather it is active confidence built upon the gift of grace.

Presumption looks only outward and is fed on arrogance. *I am a Christian, so that makes me superior to everyone else as some of our evangelical brethren would have us believe.* I call that the I have got it, you do not syndrome.

Confidence, on the other hand, is humble, yet strong and it relies on deeds, while arrogance relies on words, words that seldom move us to action. Confidence, as Paul indicates, is grounded in courage. It is substantial. It endures.

Arrogance and presumption are passing. just contrast the images of the trees that were presented in our two lessons this morning. The giant tree is destroyed in its arrogance, while the tree from the small mustard seed flourishes.

Our extroverted world has made the "idolatry of the colossal" a validation for effectiveness. The bigger the better. That applies to people, to salaries, to parishes, to businesses, to nations, -- to name a few. The small is thought to be unimportant. What is hard to see is insignificant. What does not loom large is thought valueless.

That is why it is so difficult for a rich person to enter the kingdom. Who would want all that money just to acquire something as small and insignificant as a mustard seed? yachts, fancy cars, and beach houses win hands down. When you can buy what you want, when you want it, it is hard to look beyond this world into the mustard seed realm of the Kingdom of God.

We are at a stage in our life as a Christian community, (Those who are anointed to be *little* Christs in the world.) that we need to root out the arrogance and presumption that we find in our life and proceed with *quiet* confidence to doing the tasks that have been placed before us.

In doing this, we need to recognize that the growth of the kingdom of God is never the result of our doing. That powerful image of the mustard seed is the creative power of God at work.

Too often we misinterpret Jesus' parables of growth. We need to consider that we are nineteen hundred years removed from their utterance in Galilee. Our historical perspective is shaped by the fact that it has taken two millennia for the faith to grow to the point where it is accepted by a quarter of the world's population and that the most dramatic gains have been made in our time. So, when the modern Christian reviews a parable of growth, it is tempered by the idea of slow development.

The imagery of the gospel is quite different. The early Christian could not imagine looking forward two thousand years. In fact, he probably did not expect the world, as he knew it, to exist more than a generation. They were a people in a hurry, and even though the energy for

growth was God-given, they realized that they had a part to play. They did not, could not, rely on future generations. They lived in the NOW of the Christ event. The task was before them, and they responded to that task with a sense of urgency. They, through grace, claimed the task as their own.

They recognized that disciples are a necessary part of the process. Someone must sow the seed; someone must harvest the crop and we are living in the immediacy of the growing season.

The growth parable gives them confidence because, even though the beginning may be unpromising, great things come about because of the power of God. There is not a causal relationship between the size of the seed and the shrub or the harvest it produces.

I am not sure that they would understand reasoning that said: "We are so small. We need to wait until we grow a little before we begin. As any farmer will tell you if you wait too long the season is over and you have no crop.

I think that these growth parables and Paul's words on confidence say much to us today as we look to the tasks ahead of us.

We need to remember that there is no harvest without labor. When in our striving and our labor we grow weary and weak at the realization of our limited resources, we need to reflect on the parables of growth. *THINK MUSTARD SEED!* Our limitations open the possibility of allowing God to work in the world through us.

In the final analysis, our confidence in God draws others to us. It makes us approachable and of service. A confident congregation is a plant nurtured by God's love and presence. It provides food and refuge for those in need.

Real confidence is knowing that our limited resources put to use NOW will be magnified by the Lord into MARVELOUS THINGS