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It's just three verses. About a tiny little mustard seed. How much can I say? Jesus didn't say much, just that the seeds were little but become great bushes once planted in the dirt—large enough for birds to nest in. That's what the kin-dom of God is like—starts small and grows. Well, I think we got the point, so we can say Amen and move on to the next hymn.

Wait... Not so fast. Maybe we could learn a bit more about mustard seeds, for how many of you enjoyed putting yellow mustard on your hamburgers or hotdogs this summer?

Did you know it takes about 3 months for a mustard plant to grow to full maturity? I didn't know.

Or did you know that it takes 1000 mustard seeds to make one 8-ounce jar of mustard? I didn't.

Or did you know in 2020 the total U.S. production of mustard was 81.8 million pounds?¹ Neither did I.

There's a lot more to mustard than I ever realized. How can something so small be so big?

Maybe that was the point Jesus was trying to make. Things that appear small and insignificant can become something much larger with time and patience. Jesus knew that in the midst of the mighty kingdom of Rome that the place he suggested where kin could meet would appear small and insignificant.

This vision of Jesus must have grown during his short lifetime to something much bigger, for the Roman government noticed what he was doing, and for that, he was executed on a cross. Killing Jesus was the way those in power had of trying to stamp out his revolutionary ideas of welcoming the poor and the outcasts.

The small seeds Jesus planted, however, could not be smashed, for God took those mustard seeds of faith and they grew into new life. Just look—here we are! Two thousand years later, still planted in the soil of the church! Isn't that amazing?

Now I know that we may take our gathering here for granted, but it's not always been easy to be the church, has it? I imagine you can recall stories

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of difficult times in the history of the congregation when many wondered if we had any future. Struggle has been part of the church from the very beginning, and will continue to be part of our story into the coming years.

It's that mustard seed that keeps us going, that small spark of hope, that small voice that whispers in our ears that we will be ok.

Even when we trust in God's presence in our lives, we know that struggles still exist for many people in the world, as was the case with one woman in Central Florida who created an organization called The Mustard Seed. She was

one person [who] saw a problem, and knew they had to do something to solve it.

In 1984, homelessness was becoming an epidemic in the Central Florida community. And it was, as it is today, a complicated issue. People wanted to diagnose it, cast judgment, politicize it. But Carol Kane didn't see it that way. She simply saw that some of God's children were suffering. And she wanted to help.

Carol started out of her garage, collecting household items and giving them away to people who needed them. Today, The Mustard Seed is

delivering on Carol's vision in exponential fashion. Operations have grown from a garage to a 20,000-square-foot warehouse. More important than the size of the warehouse, though, is the size of the impact.

The Mustard Seed serves 3,000 people each year — individuals and families whose lives have been torn apart by personal tragedy, natural disaster, and financial hardship.²

Out of all the stories on The Mustard Seed website, one in particular caught my eye.

For Phyllis and James, Hurricane Ian left them with nowhere to go and very few options. The South Florida couple had retired, and found themselves needing to be rescued by FEMA when their home flooded during the storm. "All we had left were our walkers."

Relocating to Orlando after the storm and settling into a retirement community without anything left, Phyllis sleeping on a folding chair, and James on the floor, where he developed carpet burns after just a week. The Mustard Seed delivered all the furniture they needed.

"The moment your staff left, I crawled into bed and napped for 4 hours. It was so good to sleep in a bed," said James of the experience.³

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One doesn't have to travel to Florida to find people in need or organizations that respond, for we have them right here in St. Joseph and Elkhart Counties. Through our barrel collections and Change for Change, we offer resources to help those in need and to support various organizations. Like mustard seeds, the amounts we collect may seem small, but those who receive them are grateful.

Planting mustard seeds, however, involves more than just donating money or clothes or food, for deeper roots can grow when we actually encounter people in need and offer them a listening ear or a gentle smile, which is something a teacher investigated with his students that led him to a surprising discovery.

Years ago a sociology professor at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore assigned his class to a city slum to interview 200 boys. "On the basis of your findings, predict their future."

Shocked at what they saw in the slums, the students estimated that 90 percent of the boys interviewed would someday serve time in prison.

Twenty years later the same professor asked another class to locate the survivors of the 200 boys and compare what happened. Of the 180 boys they could find, only four had ever been to jail.

Why had the predictions by the earlier class proven false? A common denominator—over 100 of them remembered having the same high-school teacher, Miss O'Rourke, who had been a tremendous influence on them at the time.

After a long search, Sheila O'Rourke was found in a nursing home in Memphis. When asked for her explanation she was puzzled and replied, "All I did was love every one of them."⁴

Love. It seems so small and simple, like a tiny mustard seed. But for that one teacher, it had grown enough to care for a multitude of students, an influence that lasted for many years. May you plant tiny seeds of hope and love that grow and flourish for many years.

¹ Mustard facts from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mustard_seed

² <https://mustardseedfla.org/the-mustard-seed/>

³ <https://mustardseedfla.org/story/beds-for-matt-and-phyllis/>

⁴ Alan C. Cole, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"
26th Street Church of Christ Homepage, mupfc.marshall.edu
as quoted in *Homiletics*, Vol. 17, July 2005, p. 34.