

## **A Seed Unseen**

Parable of the Mustard Seed

Matthew 13:31-32

Romans 8:31-39

I want to tell you a story about a man I met about ten years ago who was originally from China. This man grew up during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Now, for those of you who are not too familiar with that time in history, around 1949, post-World War II, as a response against the influence of Western cultures, China became a communist country. And, shortly after that time, the Cultural Revolution began. Revolutions are often turbulent transitions to new ideas and regimes, but this revolution had a unique cultural element to it along with the political and philosophical.

It was a reaction against anything that wasn't Chinese: universities were closed, western art was ripped down off walls, and western or Middle Eastern

instruments were taken and hidden or thrown into the fire, because anything that was western in nature, that is European or even Near East, African or other cultures in general were now taboo, but mostly western Eurocentric culture, any culture that was opposed to a Chinese and also communist view.

This was a time, too, when Christian churches were burned, brought to the ground, or simply turned into factories. And, that was because Christianity was mostly a Western religion even though Christianity started in the Middle East and Africa. During this Cultural Revolution, Christians went into hiding. So did professors, teachers, and all pastors. The Cultural Revolution of China was a time of oppression, oppression that included censorship of academics, religion and philosophy.

Then this young boy, a boy name He Qui, the man that I met, he finds that he

has a gift for painting. In his middle school years, he gets a job painting pottery, and he is so good at it, that he wonders about how he could receive some education about painting. His father, who was once a math professor at a university in Shanghai, but now worked in a factory, as his skills of teaching were determined to be no longer valued, sent his son to a colleague of his, an art professor, who also no longer could teach art.

This art professor gave He Qui an old, tattered book, so tattered that the pages were beginning to yellow. It was a book of Western Art History, and on the cover was what art historians consider to be one of the most famous paintings: Raphael's Madonna and Child, that is, the baby Jesus held by the Virgin Mary, his mother. He Qui had never seen images of Christianity before. He knew nothing about who Jesus was or anything which the Church taught.

So, he asked his Father's friend, "Who is this mother with her child?"

His teacher replied, "This is a painting of the Virgin Mary and of the Christ."

"What does it mean," He Qui asked of his teacher.

His teacher replied, "The Christian believes that God became a human child, so that not only could God be in the flesh with us, but also save us from ourselves."

He Qui then said in a moment of faith he now refers to the Holy Spirit, "Then I will be a Christian."

Today, He Qui is one of the most famous contemporary artists in the world and he is a follower of Christ. And, his art is not only Christian in nature, but it is essentially Chinese as it speaks to him. He naturally sees Jesus from a Chinese perspective, but his art also opens our minds to a Jesus who is universally for all no matter their culture or

race. Today, He Qui helps us to see Jesus Christ in new ways. But, he doesn't paint Jesus as European as the Italian artists did. He paints him as Chinese because He Qui is Chinese.

One painting...one painting, of a mother and her child, the baby Jesus, planted the seed of faith in He Qui. The Kingdom of Heaven, which was planted in He Qui all along now was blooming into a giant plant. And now, his paintings do the same for others. I have three of his pieces of art in my office. This one is my favorite. And, his art is also in our hymnal. One painting...one little seed is all it takes for faith to grow.

Jesus said, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in a field; it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it is grown, it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree."

For all you gardeners out there, it might be a good time to point out to all us non-gardeners that a mustard seed is usually considered a weed. It's a plant that no one intends to grow in their garden, unless you intend to grow mustard. As a weed, too, it grows very large if you let it, and in the right conditions, can take over absolutely everything.

So, a mustard seed starts out to be impossibly small, but then grows to become very large. In other words, the Kingdom of God can appear like a nasty weed we want to rid ourselves of. We may not want God's Kingdom in our lives. We probably want our own Kingdom instead.

And, if that is the case, than looking at a painting of Mary and Jesus may simply be an academic exercise: "Wow, look at the light this artist used, or look how Mary leans into Christ." Now, those are very valid investigations, as I do this

with music all the time. But, no doubt, the artist hopes to conjure devotion, faith, and the awe of the mystery of God as well. Art, like music, is not there to worship, but it is a canvas for looking into the Kingdom of God.

So, too, as Christ followers, we can get all caught up in our theology or functionality that we speak of mission and faith as something that is almost outside of ourselves, leaving the awe of the divine out of it completely.

Let me give you an example: do we hope volunteers will volunteer their time to get work done or do we ask people to consider their gifts so that St. John's may thrive? I use our awesome Education Ministry this week as an example here. These volunteers put together an amazing Virtual Vacation Bible School this summer. They were up against some hurdles to make it happen and did a lot of work to see it through.

But, they invested all that time not just to fill a position, but because the small seed of faith was there long ago that continue to grow and grow. And, this last January when approached to serve on this ministry, they did not know a pandemic would be here. And, yet they stood up to the challenge because something about reaching out to our children was to them important.

I'm seeing this in our Church Council right now, in our Taskforce members, in our quilters who are making masks, in our Community Table volunteers, in all our ministries! This pandemic is a weed no one wanted, but despite that, we will grow. We will with God's help plant the seeds of the Kingdom because although none of us signed up for this, God's Kingdom is growing in creative and changing ways. Who knows what will happen!

When thinking this week of He Qui's story, I got to thinking about how Christianity was not unlike that mustard seed after the Cultural Revolution. Christianity was a weed many did not want, and in that ancient environment, would be rooted up if found. Yet, with He Qui, the seed that was planted in him could not be pulled out of God's garden. He was going to grow as the ancient followers of Christ did and as we are praying for us today. We need only faith to trust that will happen.

It led me to wonder about our own stories of faith. And, whether we like it or not, God will find a way to grow the Kingdom of God in you and me. So, this week, think about this: Where is the seed planted for you? Where is the Kingdom of God being grown in your life and how does God want to grow it further? I ask this of you to ponder because during this very difficult and divisive time, it can be hard

to wonder about that small seed that is growing.

In fact, we may be fearful it is being squashed since we cannot be church together in the way we were used to. Just remember, God cannot be stopped. There is nothing that can separate us from the promises of the Kingdom: neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor COVID, nor anything else in creation can separate us from the love of God through Christ Jesus - NOTHING!

So, be on the lookout for the kingdom coming to you in your midst. That seed of faith, grown from somewhere unsuspecting, can often be revealed to us in differing and surprising places. Amen.