

***Mustard Seeds***

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Kristen Brown]

Good morning. It's exciting to be here. I've been waiting for this all summer [laughter]. So today we are kicking off our last part of the summer. We have come to the end of our sabbatical season and if you are new and just joined us since May, you may actually have not met Pastor Scott who is normally here. He is off being refreshed and renewed with his family and through travel and music and apparently eating a lot of pizza, according to his Instagram account [laughter]. He has a gift from our friends at the Lilly Foundation, and we too have been gathering together to be refreshed and renewed as a community this summer to talk about our values as a church and how we live those out. So I get to help us land our summer plane, which I'm very excited about. It's going to be a good last 6 weeks. I have been praying for that this summer.

All summer we have been taking different approaches to our values, and Crystal talked about at the beginning of the service our values kits which you can get on our website or out in the lobby that are sabbatical team and our liturgy team and others have gathered together to help us reflect on what it means for us to be this community in this place, and how do we live that out. How do we live out of God's kingdom in our midst. So I would invite you to go to the website or to stop in the lobby and to get one of those or multiples of those values kits and to be reflecting over these last 6 weeks about what it means to be the community of Artisan in this place. And not going to just talk about one value every week. We're going to sort of look at how do these things come together in our community and how they are interwoven in the values of God's kingdom. So as we do that, we are going to do a little review about where we started. If you were here with us at the beginning of this summer, Judy Howard Peterson was here, and she's a hard act to follow [laughter] so I'm going to do my best. Just a gifted pastor and preacher and evangelist. And she started us off at the beginning of the summer, if you remember, with the Gospel in Tweet from Luke chapter 2, which we only read about Christmas, right? She said in Luke 2 we see the Gospel in its clearest form.

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The angels come to the shepherds and they say, we have good news for you of great joy that will be for all the people. We have a gospel message and this was the message. They said, unto you this day is born a real savior who is Jesus the Messiah the Lord. On this real night, in a real place, a real savior has been born. God came with skin on into our world as a tiny baby is good news of joy for all the people. And then Judy helped us to think about what does it mean that Jesus is good news of great joy for all the people. And so that's the conversation that we're going to keep going with as we finish our summer together. God came into our world and that is good news, but here's the deal. It's only sort of true. And before you get real nervous that I think the gospel's only "sort of true" and you call Scott from sabbatical [laughter], it's sort of true that God came into *our* world. God actually came into the world as the Middle Eastern Jewish man in the first century, and it actually really matters that we know that brown skinned Jesus lived 2000 years ago. Jesus not a lot of time telling people good news of great joy that sounded like good news to 1st century Jewish ears. And if you want to understand Jesus you have to understand something about his setting. So we talk about roots, because they're part of our roots. And then Jesus left, and Jesus' disciples the apostles were sent out into places like North Africa and Greece and Turkey, out into Rome. That's where the Gospel first took root. They went into real places throughout the Hellenistic world and they said what does God's dream for the world look like here in this place.

Looking at their own world, the early church brought good news of great joy and as they did that, the Gospel got bigger. It sounded different in Galatia and Ephesus than it did in Jerusalem. And we actually have stories of the sort of conflicts that arose as the Gospel continued to grow in the world. And people were saying, well, what does it mean for the Gentiles to live the good news? How is that different than it was for Jews? And they had some major arguments. It wasn't a smooth process by any means. But the question was always, what does God's good news mean here in our own situation. And that is the question that every generation and every cultural location of the church has had to ask and to answer. It's the question that we have to ask. What does it mean for Jesus to be the good news of great joy in Rochester, New York in July, 2019 in the United States in a globalizing world. All of those pieces matter.

So many of you know I'm a Ph.D. student and I'm just going to confess, this is sort of what I'm writing my dissertation about just a little bit [laughter]. So I may or may not have a dog in this fight, and no, I'm not done and yes, I've missed a lot of deadlines. And it's going to be okay, we're all going to be okay. I'm going back to that question; what does the good news mean here in our situation. So as we end our summer together, that is our question I want us to be thinking about for the next 6 weeks and we're going to use the parables of Jesus to help us to think about that. The parables are stories but they're not just stories. The word itself means "to be thrown alongside." Parables are stories that get thrown alongside our lives and then we

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have to actually figure out what to do with them. And it's funny if you read Jesus' disciples, their regular response to the parables was, "What does it mean?" Which is really the question of the parables — what does it mean and how are we going to live out what it means in our setting? Jesus takes these everyday situations. They're very concrete, the parables so it's things like sowing seeds and wayward children coming home, and a landowner who pays his day laborers and a guy who's forgiven a great debt, and a woman who seeks justice from a judge. These are the situations that Jesus throws alongside our lives and says, how are you going to live out the kingdom as it's shown in this story? These stories are trying to tell people something about God's world that is trying to break into our world. So I call this series "Artisan: A Parable," because I think that's what our church ought to be. We get thrown alongside people's lives as a picture of what God's good news can look like in the world. Our life together should be an invitation to people around us to understand something about what God's kingdom is like and how it shows up in our world. So we're going to start today with the parable of the mustard seed which was read for us earlier from Matthew 13. And in Matthew 13 there are a whole bunch of parables that start with the phrase, "The Kingdom of Heaven" or "the Kingdom of God is like -" (those are sort of interchangeable in Matthew's gospel) and then some concrete situations about what the kingdom is like. So Jesus talks about a sower who sows seed sort of indiscriminately. He talks about grain and weeds that grow up together, he talks about yeast being worked into dough — that was a part of our reading this morning. And all of those are related and they all sort of give us different facets of what the kingdom looks. And I'm just going to focus on the mustard seed. So this is verse 31 and 32, and I'll just read it again because it's very short. Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in this field. It is the smallest of all the seeds and when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

So I also brought a mustard seed today because seriously, the parables are the best because they are object lessons just built in. And I was compelled by Judy that I need to start thinking about how to do this really concretely because she's really good at that — she always had these great concrete things. So I'm like, I can bring in a mustard seed. Well here's the deal [holds up seed]. Like, you actually can't see this, right? Here is the jar of them and these are yellow mustard seeds and this is not what Jesus was talking about, I'll tell you that right now. Yellow mustard is not indigenous, black mustard as indigenous to that part of the world. And it actually couldn't matter really any less to the story. It's funny, it's a small thing. It's tiny for sure. Is it the smallest of seeds? No. Does it grow into the largest of trees? It does not, and that's fine [laughter]. If you read scholars, a lot of them spend a lot of their time trying to justify how Jesus was right in saying that. Well he wasn't giving a science lesson, so it really it does not matter. But here's what Jesus was saying about the mustard seed. At the time that Jesus lived, to say

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something was the size of a mustard seed, let's just say it was of no great significance, and you can understand why. This looks like it is of no great significance. It's a proverbial saying. It's like if I said something was just "a drop in the bucket." If you are Native American English speaker you probably have heard that idiom before, and it's a way that we say this thing is not of great consequence. Every language has its own ways of talking about things like that, and the mustard seed was sort of a good way for them to talk about things that are of very little consequence. And then he goes on and he talks about how this seed gets planted and it grows into a tree. Well, it doesn't grow into a tree, it grows into a bush of some kind. And actually in the United States where it is not indigenous but has been brought over, it's more like a weed. So the point is not what size the tree is going to be, it's what Jesus is saying this tree is all about.

In the Old Testament, birds coming to rest in the branches of trees was the way the prophets talked about a world in which everyone had everything they needed for a flourishing life. Trees in scripture though not always trees. You've got good trees and bad trees in the Bible ,but there's a lot of trees in Scripture that are used to paint this kind of picture. So you have a tree and in Genesis 2 that's the Tree of Life, it's planted in the middle of this garden. And you have a tree in Revelation along the banks of this river in the City of God and it says the leaves of this tree are for the healing of the nations. So you get this picture of trees that are really meant to depict for us a space in which everybody can come and find health and wholeness and well being. So for Jesus just say the mustard seed becomes a tree for the birds of the air, this picture of everyone being welcome, it's a way of saying there's room for everyone to be healthy and whole. So this parable is Jesus saying my kingdom is this tiny seed that seems insignificant but it's growing into a tree that is for everyone. And you know, that's really nice. And our 21st century ears hear it and think that's really nice, it's very inclusive of Jesus and it is very inclusive of Jesus. But in Jesus' day he was speaking to an occupied people under the rule of an oppressive empire, and they were waiting for the day of political overthrow. And a mustard seed just wasn't what they were looking for.

Jesus is saying, this kingdom that I am the king of and that you are waiting for isn't a violent overthrow. It appears insignificant. It is made up of feeding hungry people, of welcoming sinners and strangers to dinner, of healing the sick of offering compassion and kindness and love to those around you. If your expectation is violent overthrow and you get acts of kindness and compassion you might be like, okay, that's nice but when are we actually getting to the thing that you really came for? When are you going to take power? Because here's the deal, and I'm not going to say much about this. I could say a lot about this. But we have a love affair with power. And Jesus' kingdom really challenges that in us. I won't go into details about our illicit affair with power but it's always been true in the history of the church and is probably one of the most important conversations we have to have as a church and how are we thinking

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about power in the world. Jesus uses this parable to challenge our expectations. Jesus says the kingdom that is actually the one you want doesn't come by violence and domination but like a seed that, when it's planted in the ground, takes root and grows into a tree that can bless the world. And it can't happen another way because the way of the kingdom *is* the kingdom. Or I guess you could say, you can't do kingdom things except in kingdom ways. If you notice, he says God's kingdom is like a mustard seed, not like a tree with branches where everyone is healthy and whole. Now, that might also be true but that's not what the parable of the mustard seed is about. The kingdom is not the big thing we're waiting for — the kingdom is the small thing that we do every day that breathes more of God's life into the world. That is the kingdom. And Zechariah the prophet says, “Do not despise the day of small things,” or other translations say, “Do not despise small beginnings for the Lord rejoices to see the work begin.”

You know, we have a building project going on. I don't know if you know that. It doesn't necessarily look like we have a building project going on right now, but I can tell you that we have a building project going on [laughter]. And we actually have been doing the building project for a while, right? The first day we started to say we're going to build a building is the day the building project started. And I can tell you that people have been signing papers and going to meetings and doing all the things that it takes to do a building project even when you can't necessarily see that we're in the midst of a building project. “Do not despise the day of small beginnings.” There's a lot of small beginnings in our lives and in the world. It's easy to despise small things and to think we need to do these great big things, and it's hard sometimes to believe that the small things are the kingdom. That the moment I take in my day to actually be present to another person, to not be rushing around but to be present, to look somebody in the eye to see how they're doing — doing that actually *is* the kingdom. That moment, it's a small thing. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. Do not despise the small things.

What is that going to mean for you this week? That's a real question and it's one I will not answer. I have to answer it for me, but you have to answer it for you, and we have to answer it for us. It's going to mean different things to different people. If the kingdom is a mustard seed and not a tree, how does that change the way you go about your life this week? How will that change the way we think about our life together as a community? Those are the questions the parable throws alongside our lives that we are invited to answer. You might also think about where have you seen small things taking root. Things that produce joy and flourishing for the people around you. Pay attention to those things. Because it might just be that God's kingdom is trying to break into your world in those small, seemingly insignificant things every day. That is my prayer for us this week. I pray that God grants us the eyes to see. That we are called to do

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small things as ambassadors of God's kingdom that is coming into the world. May we have eyes to see the small things. Amen.

Every week we gather together at this table, and it is a table of small things. It is bread and wine and grape juice. And it is a gathering together with us and with God for just a moment. It is a small thing, and yet this small thing, as we participate, grows in us. So we are going to, as we do every week, come to the table. On the night that Jesus was handed over to suffering and death he took bread. And when he had given thanks, he broke it and he gave it to His disciples and he said, Take and eat. As you do this, do it in remembrance of me. And after supper he took the cup of wine and he said, Drink of this all of you. It is a new covenant in my blood which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of your sins. As you drink it, do it in remembrance of me. God blessed the small things. This bread and this cup to be for your people the body and blood, your faithful presence with us in the small things. That we might be a true sign of your kingdom in the world. Amen.

At Artisan, this table is open is open to all who follow Jesus Christ. Whether you're a member here or not we invite you to come. It's not actually our invitation to this, it's Christ invitation. This is Christ's table and he invites you. So how we do it here and if you're new with us, we come down the center aisle, take a piece of bread, dip it in the cup of your choice. We have gluten free options as well because everyone is welcome here and there should be something for all of you at the table. Also during this time if you would like prayer for anything, a member of our prayer team is at the back and would be happy to pray with you. I also have sprinkled some mustard seeds on the table this morning, so you can come and reflect on what it means for you to grow up in Christ this week, to grow mustard seeds in your own life. And feel free if you'd like to take one with you. So if you are ready, I invite you to come and meet with God at the table.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](http://ArtisanChurch.com)