3rd Sunday after Epiphany
Families for Christ
Rolling Meadows - 1966

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IN NOMINE JESU

St Matthew 13: 31-33 Another parable He put before them saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all seeds, but 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.... He told them another parable, "The kingdom of heave is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened."

A GRAIN OF MUSTARD SEED!

These two parables have something to say to each of us as Christians, and certainly to our whole congregation as it begins this mission week of Families for Christ. We must first understand the mood of these people who are gathered around Jesus. They are partly discouraged and partly expectant and excited. They had given up their jobs, their security, and had staked everything on Him. And now, quite understandably, they are asking: What's going to come of it? What will be the outcome? The answer seems to be: Nothing. Almost nothing is happening. Sure, a few poor people, a few sick people have been helped. But this is a mere drop-in-the-bucket and it has, so to speak, fizzled out. The upper classes, the intellectual and political, reject Him or, what is even worse, simply ignore Him. The capital city acts as if He did not exist. The Greek and Roman centers of culture pay no attention to Him - much like our modern world which, at best, only casts a fleeting glance in His direction. Jesus had asserted that the kingdom of God had begun. But when a man asked quite realistically and soberly, Where? - the results looked pretty meager. The few dirty children who ran after Him, the beggars, and the few hangers-on from the outskirts of society -- these cannot very well be the kingdom of God. Is this the kind of thing we have staked our whole existence on? Is this the extent of the accomplishment of this Lord, to Whom all power in heaven and earth had been given, supposedly given?

Something like this was the mood of the disciples as it is reflected in the parable. Yes, says the Lord, you are right; with Me everything begins in a very small way. Seen from the outside, My work and I Myself look insignificant. And then He paints the picture of a man who reaches into a seed packet with two fingertips and takes out one seed - a real minimal minimum! Actually, it is quite a trick to get hold of a single seed, because they are so tiny. But strangely

enough, when it is put into the earth it grows up into a great shrub, and a fat sparrow, who has picked hundreds of these tiny seeds for his breakfast, can teeter on its branches.

Here the question arises: Did Jesus mean by this that Christianity would conquer the whole world? Quite definitely He did not. When Jesus speaks of the mysteries of growth He is not thinking so much of the quantitative process by whic His church grows ever larger and finally, in a mighty Christian invasion, conquers the world, but rather of the fact that in His church there is an indwelling dynami which must lay hold upon everything around it. This is the point of the leaven, which leavens the whole mass of meal and changes its quality. This is the point o the salt, even the smallest quantity of which changes a whole bowl of soup. And this is the point of those sayings which speak of the church as a light in the world. How exceedingly small is the source of light in an automobile headlight, and how tremendously great is the cone of light it cuts oft of the gigantic darkne

So it is with Christians, says our Lord. As far as numbers are concerne they remain a small group, a hopeless minority; and Luther knew what he was saying when he called the Christian a solitary bird, sitting somewhere on a rooftop and warbling his little song. We have all experienced, haven't we, what it means to have no one in our job, or our office, or our class in school, who is at one with us in the ultimate things of life? Often we fear the surprised glance which otherwise very nice and reasonable people cast at us when we happen to drop a remark about matters of faith in a conversation or even when we bow our heads to pray before a meal. Then we often feel as if we were surrounded by an invisible, insulated wall which, despite all the cordiality of our relationship and despite all the good companionship, leaves one a bit estranged. Well, so it is; we are in the minority. Except that now Jesus is indicating to us that this quantitative way of counting is completely false. How rediculous it is to say: Here are a few ounces o yeast and there are two pounds of ~~meal~~ flour. According to the democratic point of view, the ~~meal~~ flour would then be the one to call the ~~tune~~ plays, because the yeast is outrated, But Jesus tells us just the opposite: It all depends on which has the real dynamic,

and this is what the yeast has and not the meal. This the salt has and not the soup. This the light has and not the vast expanse of darkness. Of course, as long as the grains of salt remain in the saltcellar, as long as the light is under a bushel, others cannot see the power that dwells within us. And if light could think and reason it would probably acquire an anxiety complex when suddenly it realized: Outside everything is pitch-dark night and I am only a little light. What can I do against that?

This is precisely the anxiety of many Christians who get caught under the cursed spell of thinking in terms of numbers and end up with an inferiority complex of the minority. When we realize that so many prominent and influential people will simply have nothing to do with this thing which has gripped our life - we proceed to withdraw into the salt cellar and under the bushel of our Christian congregations where we all share the same presuppositions, where a few Christians seeds and a few Christian candle stumps huddle timidly together and moan the blues

What we need instead is to let God give us the godly nerve and the stout hearted audacity to venture out into the soup and the darkness of the world. Wher ever we are, we should dare to say who we are and what we believe. Then we shall have the surprise of our life. We will find that the Lord is right when He speaks of the power of leaven and light. If we do not leaven others, if we do not leaven our environment - in other words, if we do not allow our Christian faith to work, we ourselves grow sour. And the many sour Christians and the many stunted lives we have in the church are simply products of the saltcellar, who do not scatter themselves about, and the result is that they themselves are infected by the processes of decay. We must see very realistically that the people around us who do not know Christ are actually very poor, insipid meal - even if on the surface they may be big shots. We must simply remember that they badly need us as salt and leaven. Then quite spontaneously the fear of being in the minority will be forgotten and we shall become aware that we have a mission and a task and that it pays! It pays to trust the promises of Jesus and count on them!

This is precisely what the parable of the mustard seed means. Here too the emphasis is not upon external growth and bigness - increasing membership

statistics. This is rather a matter of the growth of a Christian's functioning, a matter of his maturing in his mission and his effectiveness. At first there is only a tiny seed, which cannot move of its own power, which anyone can take in his hand or let lie where it is, or which may be picked up by a sparrow. It is completely passive. But this ceases as soon as it gets into the earth. Then it becomes a great tree which casts its shade and shelters the birds. And so it is with Christians. Sometimes only a single seed of God's Word falls into a human heart. And often how minute and insignificant were the words which Jesus sowed and which then became the very destiny of men! Follow Me, He said, and when Matthew the tax collector heard it, it was all up with him and he became a messenger for the whole world. Behold, the Lamb of God. And when John the fisherman heard it, everything he had ever thought and said before was hushed within him and he became a witness who feeds our faith to this day. Go your way, your faith has mad you well. And when the sick and sorrowing heard this, there began to burn in thei hearts a fire and makes them shining witnesses of the Savior in our world. These little seeds of words became words of destiny, shining like stars in our skies too

Have you ever observed what happens when a seed falls into a crack in a wall, how the roots of the tree which grows from it burst the stone? So it is wit these little seeds of words which God has buried in our hearts. They refuse to remain in the cracks and crevices of our inner life; they burst open the inner man and go seeking light. Of course it is true that faith begins in the stillness of the heart, and it must constantly be returning to quiet communion with God. A Christian without quietness is a tree without roots. But a Christian who is only quiet, a Christian who keeps his mouth shut about what has been bestowed upon him, is nothing but a dud. He is dynamite that fails to go off. If the world has not yet changed and if scoffers ask what actually has changed in 2000 years of Christianity, then the fault lies not with the wicked heathen who have sabotaged the kingdom of God but rather with the large number of Christian duds who have burrowed themselves into the ground and think they have done their duty. We ought to check sometime and find out whether even the slightest discernible impact has been made upon our immediate neighbors which would indicate that we have been entrusted with

a dynamic, explosive power. We ought to look at our own family or the place where we work and see whether there are even one or two persons who are privileged to dwell under the boughs of that tree which has been planted in your heart and mine, and whether they are being refreshed and strengthened in its shade. Then perhaps we may realize whom we have denied, despite all our piety; then perhaps we may tur back and repent before the cock crows the third time.

How can we become salt, and light, and leaven? How can we grow into a great tree? The answer of Jesus' parable is: We can do this only as we grow into Him, as His Word is formed in us, as we allow everything we are and think and do t be permeated by Him, as we see in our fellow men and fellow workers the men for whom He died, as we allow our work to be hallowed by Him, as we give thinks to him for the joys and fulfillments of our life and accept the pains and disciplines as from His hand, and finally, when death comes, as we - in the words of Matthias Claudius - let Him put His hand beneath our head to lift us up and hold us. We serve a Savior to whom the world belong and before whom every knee shall bow. Therefore, let us take courage and dare to be what He has called us to be! Amen.