

“The Ministry of the Mustard Seed”
Matthew 13:31-33 | Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7
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These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon...

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

At the Presbyterian elementary school I attended, we prefaced every lunchtime with one of two blessings. If we were heading to the cafeteria, it was either the doxology or the equally historic, theologically vetted Johnny Appleseed song. Do you know the one I’m talking about?

“Oh, the Lord is good to me, and so I thank the Lord for giving me the things I need like the sun and the rain and the apple seed. The Lord is good to me.”

Like so many of the songs that get stuck in our heads, that one was both penned and popularized by none other than Walt Disney. Johnny Appleseed made his first appearance in a late 1940’s cartoon musical, strolling the countryside with a bible, a bag of seeds, and a tin pot he most often used as a hat.

Embellishments aside, that bumbling character was based on a real one, John Chapman. Born in New England at the end of the 18th century, Chapman was known as a bit of an eccentric. He traveled west and down the Ohio River in a double-hulled canoe, stopping along the way to scatter—you guessed it—apple seeds.

Though he’s since been remembered as an aimless vagabond, Chapman’s commitment to the polished little apple seed actually produced a host of new varieties, many of which we enjoy today. With each seed, Chapman was planting the possibility of a new flavor, texture, size, and color of fruit.

Food writer, Michael Pollan, explains how it happened, “Every seed in that apple, not to mention every seed riding down the Ohio alongside John Chapman, contains the genetic instructions for a completely new and different apple tree, one that, if planted, would bear only the most glancing resemblance to its parents. If not for grafting—the ancient technique of cloning trees—every apple in the world would be its own distinct variety, and it would be impossible to keep a good one going beyond the life span of that particular tree. In the case of the apple, the fruit nearly always falls far from the tree.”¹

¹ Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-eye View of the World* (New York: Random House, 2002), 10.

John Chapman planted seeds of possibility, no two of them alike. Often, he had continued down the river by the time those seeds became trees and those trees bore fruit. He didn't always get to taste the outcomes of his actions, and surely some were sour. But all in all, his ministry (Chapman was also a Christian missionary) has made our lives a little sweeter.

Of course, before Johnny Appleseed was playing in the dirt, God's people were well acquainted with such agricultural endeavors. The bible begins in a garden, and by the time we arrive at today's text, people have been living off the land for generations.

Today's passage from the prophet, Jeremiah, refers to a people called to cultivate possibility in the midst of a limited situation. The Israelites were in exile, having been deported in three waves from their conquered homeland and journeyed multiple months to the distant city of Babylon.

There, they were strangers in every sense. They didn't speak the same language. They didn't eat the same food. They didn't sing the same songs. The cultural context was entirely different from what they had known. God's people were traumatized, despondent, and unmoored.

Psalm 137 gives voice to their despair:

“By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down, and there we wept
when we remembered Zion...

How could we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you.”

These are the words of a people whose hopes and dreams had been dashed. Home had become a distant memory. The plans they made had been dramatically altered, and they couldn't see a way forward on such unfamiliar ground.

Enter the prophet. Jeremiah speaks directly to God's people in exile. Often referred to as the “weeping prophet,” he joins the people in their lament but refuses to allow death and despair the final word. Jeremiah doesn't buy into the people's conviction that their lives are over. Instead, he encourages them to live as fully as possible within life's real and challenging limits. Rather than biding their time until some better future, the Israelites are called to invest right where they are.

Jeremiah is notably specific about what such investment entails. “Build houses and live in them,” he instructs, “plant gardens and eat what they produce.” It seems God will remedy the people's despair with...bricks and radishes? Perhaps, but not only with radishes...with squash and cucumbers, peaches and tomatoes, and apples and all the things for which they stand. As you may have guessed, Jeremiah's instruction isn't really about planting gardens so much as the hope-filled choice to scatter some seeds and see what happens.

Planting a garden is a symbol of investment. It's a sign of faith. Here, in this strange place, God's people are to make themselves at home. Babylon is not where they imagined they would be, but it's where they are. They can either root themselves in foreign soil or wither with longing for what might have been.

So, the Israelites dig in. They create community, make art, build careers, and raise families. They worship the Lord, their God. A full generation unfolds this way. People are born, and people are buried. For seventy years, the Israelites make Babylon their home. At the end of the day, they don't just survive; they flourish, all because they chose to tend the ground beneath their feet. They heeded the prophet's call to "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile...for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

God's people build houses and plant gardens, not knowing what the outcome might be. They demonstrate their faith through investment in the place where the Lord has planted them, if only for a season. They seek to live fully where they are, for however long they can. They cultivate possibilities the likes of which they can't even begin to imagine.

A few of us may know what it's like to be as homesick as the Israelites. Regardless, I would guess most of us have some experience in exile. It may not have been on a Babylonian scale, but I think it's safe to say that at some point, you and I have felt far from home. We have felt distant from God, others, or ourselves. I'm talking about the times when some challenging circumstance or inner turmoil causes us to question the ground beneath our feet. We all drift away from home every now and then.

Six months into her treatment for stage IV cancer, Kate Bowler was having her own exilic moment. Many of you are familiar with Dr. Bowler, the Duke Divinity professor who delivered Westminster's Heritage Lecture here in the sanctuary late last year. While she's doing relatively well now, she was once regularly traveling between Durham and Atlanta with the desperate hope of remaining qualified for a long-shot clinical trial.

In response to her suffering, people began suggesting that Bowler come up with a bucket list. Never mind that she was in the thick of chemotherapy treatment with the energy to match. Bowler's care providers proposed that a bucket list would be clarifying, that it would help her find meaning, that at the very least, it would take her mind off things a bit.

She gave it some thought and briefly wondered what she would even include. Digging through old journals, she discovered visions she had once cast: See the pyramids. Publish a book. Make decent bread. Once, these were simply dreams that took shape within the assumption of infinite hours. Now, they were...what? A bucket list?

There's a fine but distinct line between dreams and bucket lists. Bowler writes, "A bucket list disguises a dark question as a challenge: what do you want to do before you die? We all want, in the words of Henry David Thoreau, to 'live deep and suck out all the marrow of life.' But do we attain that by listing everything we've ever wanted to do? Should we really focus on how many moments we can collect?"²

Don't get me wrong. There are plenty of things I'd love to do, things I hope I *will* do. Learn Spanish. Travel around Turkey. Complete the Appalachian Trail. Some of those things may take a long time, but others are accessible right now. Read more fiction. Go for a walk after dinner. Host dinner parties for family and friends.

We all have hopes and dreams, things we want to do someday soon or down the road. What gives me pause is when we begin to treat these aspirations like another checklist. Bucket lists make life out as something to be completed, accomplished, perfected. And what if we don't? What if there are things we simply don't get around to? What if life takes us in another direction? Where do we locate our purpose if, or more likely, *when* we can't do all the things?

² Kate Bowler, *No Cure for Being Human (And Other Truths I Need to Hear)* (New York: Random House, 2021), 56-57.

“The problem with aspirational lists,” writes Bowler, “is that they often skip the point entirely. Instead of helping us grapple with our finitude, they have approximated infinity. With unlimited time and resources, we could do anything, be anyone.” She continues, “It is much easier to count items than to know what counts.”³ In other words, it’s possible to get so hung up on *doing* that we lose sight of the gift of simply *being*. We fill every last line of our list, but we fail to leave room for the Spirit to surprise us with the sorts of things that are beyond our wildest hopes and dreams.

What if we were to put down our bucket lists and plant gardens instead? Maybe even plant mustard seeds? A bucket list stretches on and on but ultimately is limited to the things we can imagine doing. By contrast, a mustard seed is super-duper small. Jesus specifically points out that it’s “the smallest of all the seeds.” A mustard seed is finite, but abundance is written into its DNA. It grows into a sprout, a stem, a shrub, and finally a tree with branches full of birds. When you plant a mustard seed, you’re planting possibilities. You’re making room for life to flourish without knowing exactly what that will look like.

Around a month ago, I shared that I have accepted a new call as Chaplain at my alma mater, Davidson College, in North Carolina. While I’m excited and feel the Spirit is leading me there, I am also going to really miss you all. It’s been a privilege sharing life and serving alongside you across the past couple of years.

In many ways, it seems we’ve shared in a season of seed planting. Westminster has long cultivated good soil. This is a healthy church that nurtures life within and beyond its walls. Every now and then, something like a pandemic or a pastoral transition stirs that soil up. I know I’m stretching this metaphor now, but you know what I mean, right? It can be tough to weather big change, but here’s the thing: all that tilling makes room for new things to grow. I arrived on the heels of some big change, and it has been a joy to see what God has sown through this congregation and our partners in ministry.

I’d like to take a moment to name some of the seeds I’ve seen planted. Together, we have responded to God’s call to witness and service by:

- investing financial and human resources in a house where formerly incarcerated women can begin the journey of reentry into society;
- working alongside people of different faiths to build a home that a young mother and now owns through Habitat for Humanity;
- strengthening our relationships with local partners, including Pleasant Valley Connection, where dozens of Westminster volunteers are building relationships with children on a regular basis;
- joining an interfaith network to pursue justice, particularly in the areas of housing and mental health;
- building relationships and understanding at the US/Mexico border;
- engaging in conversations about best practices in mission, and seeking to implement our learning atop a shifting landscape.

We’ve also invested in our life together by:

- sharing plenty of meals (and surely thousands, *if not trillions*, of donuts!) in grateful fellowship with one another;

³ Bowler, 56-57.

- setting aside time to rest and play on retreats in the rolling hills of western North Carolina;
- engaging in a series of small groups, WestConnect, where members are sharing life and growing in faith together;
- and welcoming dozens of new members into a vibrant community of faith where open minds open hearts.

Along the way, we've centered our lives in worship, coming together week after week to pray, sing, listen, and respond.

These are seeds, and with the Spirit's attentive care, I hope they'll continue to grow. Maybe one will even work its way into your heart, inspiring you to invest in this community in some new and transformational way. Who knows what might take root?

Whether you realize it or not, you all have also planted seeds in the heart of this growing pastor. You've welcomed me. You've nurtured me. You've trusted me. You've challenged me. The experiences we've shared have made an impression on me. They've changed me. They have lodged themselves in my soul and shaped my imagination, as I navigate this season and prepare for the next. You have planted possibilities in me that will continue to grow, and I am deeply grateful.

What seeds is the Spirit planting in your life? None of us can predict or control how life unfolds, but I promise to nurture those you've planted, and I trust you'll do the same. God is inviting and involving each of us in the ministry of the mustard seed. And what a joy it is to plant and to prune, to quench and to care, to rejoice at the harvest, and to share in the feast.