

"Cutting the Mustard" A sermon based on Psalm 119:129-136, Romans 8:26-39 and Matthew 13:31-32 delivered on Sunday, July 26, 2026 by the Rev. Alison Dutton Jacobs at the First Congregational UCC of Onekama, Michigan,

Mustard and I have a troubled relationship. When I use it on some type of food or other or cook with it, I somehow get it somewhere on my body or on my clothes. The worst incidence of this was when I flew back from a Mission Trip in Honduras. I was really hungry because we had not been able to eat before we left. So, I got a couple of hotdogs with mustard and onions at the Boston airport. As I walked out of the restaurant, I looked down and realized I had somehow dropped copious amounts of mustard on my light blue dress—everywhere! I needed to change but had left all the clothes I had brought with me at the mission for their distribution for those in need. I only had the Mumu type dress, I had bought as a souvenir, so I had to wear that when we flew to Portland. It was huge, because I bought it as a gift, but at least it didn't have mustard all over it!

Mustard plants come in three major varieties: White Mustard, also called yellow mustard (the one I usually have problems with!), which produces mild-flavored seeds that are white to light yellow, you have one taped to your bulletin this morning; Brown Mustard which is known as Indian, Chinese, or leaf mustard, and produces dark to light brown seeds with a sharper flavor and is used in Dijon mustard; and finally Black Mustard which produces dark brown to black seeds with a pungent flavor used mostly in curry. It is the black mustard tree to which Jesus is referring in our Matthew passage this morning. A mustard seed will germinate in about 5-10 days if the soil conditions are right. The black mustard tree will grow to an average of 3-5 feet tall and can continue to grow up to 10-15 feet tall and just as wide.

Kristi Wilson in her blogspot about this passage cuts right to the chase when she says: "*When we allow God's word to grow in our lives we can be a*

blessing and a place of rest and safety to those around us. A mustard seed amount of faith can move mountains but the day to day cares of life can cancel the effects." (9/6/2017 Blog) The words of our anthem this morning stated this same sentiment very simply, as well.

Jesus' parable of the mustard seed is basically asking us to examine our behavior to see if we are able to "cut the mustard." This phrase is an idiom used to indicate that someone or something is effective, competent, or meets a required standard. If a person or object does not "cut the mustard," it means they fall short of expectations. The exact origin of the phrase is uncertain, but several theories exist: One theory links it to the piquancy and zest of mustard, associating the heat of mustard with energy, enthusiasm, or sharpness in behavior. This figurative use dates back to at least 1672 with the phrase "as keen as mustard." The word "cutting" in the phrase is thought to mean "exhibiting" or "showing off", similar to expressions like "cutting a fine figure." Whatever it's origin, the question remains for each of us: Are we able to "cut the mustard" as Christians?

Psalm 119 speaks of God's laws that need to be obeyed, so we can "cut the mustard." Hear these words:

133 Direct my footsteps according to your word
let no sin rule over me.

134 Redeem me from human oppression,
that I may obey your precepts.

Psalm 119 is the longest Psalm in the Bible. This is so because it is an acrostic where each section begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet and each line in the section begins with that letter. The overall theme of the entire Psalm is the word of God, the law, statutes, commandments, and precepts of God for our living out our lives. It reminds us, especially the quote that I shared, that we are spiritual beings struggling to live in a human world of sin and oppression.

Chapter 8 of Paul's Letter to the Romans has many sections that are often quoted but verses 26 and 27 are the ones which speak of our topic today, he writes this:

"²⁶ In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. ²⁷ And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God."

The reason that faith as small as a mustard seed can bring great things to happen is because we have a helper, a counselor, an advocate in the Holy Spirit to walk beside us and intercede for us. The Spirit helps us to plant good seeds, seeds from our hearts, because in our human weakness we are also capable of planting bad seeds.

Christian writer and advocate, C.S. Lewis, who himself converted from atheism to Christianity, once wrote in a letter to a friend, that:

"The truth is that evil is not a real thing at all, like God. It is simply good spoiled. That is why I say there can be good without evil, but no evil without good. You know what the biologists mean by a parasite—an animal that lives on another animal. Evil is a parasite."

Lewis' conversion to Christianity came through small moments, small seeds of Joy, that he could only explain by the presence of God. His book Surprised by Joy describes his journey.

For Lewis the "bad seeds" that get planted are good that has been "spoiled." In the metaphor of the "mustard seed" this might be the result of the lack of nurture, not proper soil, or neglect. We know that these things can cause good things to spoil and "not cut the mustard."

There are some new adult mosaic creating art forms. They are marketed under various names at craft stores, but many of them are called "seed beads." The beads are only about 0.0827 inches in diameter. The artist applies them to a special canvas backing to create a picture. These seed

beads are not much bigger than a mustard seed and the result of taking these little bits of color and putting them together can create a lovely picture. This is what a faith as small as a mustard seed can create in our lives! Some of these "seeds" are called diamond dots because they have a flat bottom for easier application. Last week Carolyn Brooks showed me such a mosaic that she had made. As you can see, these small bits of joy placed side by side can make a picture of joy. This is what Jesus was trying to tell us. Our faith is made up of the small seeds of joy that we collect in our lives, the good deeds we do for each other, Let us go from this place and create a world as beautiful as this picture! Amen.

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