

Sally Hammel: Good morning. Welcome to morning prayers. Please stand as you're able to join me in the responsive reading Psalm 144 in the Black Appleton Psalter.

Sally Hammel: "Blessed be the Lord, my rock, who trains my hands for war and my fingers for battle."

Congregation: "My rock, my fortress, my stronghold, my deliverer. My shield in whom I take refuge, who subdues peoples under me."

Sally Hammel: "O Lord, what are human beings that you regard them? Or mortals that you think of them?"

Congregation: "They are like breath: their days are like a passing shadow."

Sally Hammel: "Bow your Heavens, O Lord, and come down. Touch the mountains so that they smoke."

Congregation: "Make the lightning flash and scatter them. Send down your arrows and rout them."

Sally Hammel: "Stretch out your hand from on high, set me free and rescue me from the mighty waters, from the hand of aliens."

Congregation: "Whose mouths speak lies and whose rights hands are false."

Sally Hammel: "I will sing a new song to you, O God. Upon a 10-stringed harp, I will play to you."

Congregation: "The One who gives victory to kings, who rescues His servant David."

Choir: (singing).

Alanna Sullivan: Thank you. Today's reading comes from the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 13: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown, it is the greatest of shrubs."

Alanna Sullivan: Now, I don't know about you, but I tend to think of God's Kingdom a bit more triumphantly than a mustard bush. Surely, Heaven has more substance to it. For one, mustard bushes are small and squatty. They tend to be low to the ground, and also highly invasive, persistent, and really hard to get rid of.

Alanna Sullivan: So this parable leaves us scratching our heads like so many parables. So why does Jesus use this parable to describe the Kingdom of Heaven? Well, for one, Heaven is hard to describe. It's not something for literalists like me, and at most, what Jesus can offer us is that glimpse or a glimmer of it. And the glimpse that we catch might not be the one that we expect for if it were up to us, we might

try to describe the Kingdom of Heaven as something so vast, so enormous that it defies description.

Alanna Sullivan: Jesus challenges the popular notion that bigger is always better, and Jesus shows a consistent preference for small and unassuming things. "Let the children come to me." "You are the salt of the earth." "God notes the fall of every sparrow." Therefore, it's not too surprising that Jesus chooses the mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds, to illustrate that God brings about big things from small beginnings.

Alanna Sullivan: And this is a pattern with which Jesus is all too well-acquainted, for it is revealed in the very life of the one telling this parable: A child born in a stable in a forgotten corner of a big world. He becomes our access to the larger realities of life, including that largest of all realities that we call God. An itinerant preacher on the hillside speaking few and small things gives new direction to history. And Jesus told this parable to a small and motley crew of disciples, a group not much more than a mustard seed in size and influence. He told these parables as words of encouragement for the disciples could not have imagined how their message of good news would spread over the entire earth.

Alanna Sullivan: So why does God prefer small things? Well, I think for one reason it might be that it helps us not to be too intimidated by what we are called to share in. It affirms that we all have a part of it. We all have a piece of the action. If Heaven started out as something larger than a mustard seed, we would be so overwhelmed or intimidated by the enormity of that reality that we might not even get started.

Alanna Sullivan: God dares us to aim small when God invites us to share in this enormous reality. Desmond Tutu, the South African social rights activist, former Archbishop, and head of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was once asked what was a formative experience of his life? He said, "One incident immediately comes to mind. When I was a young boy, I saw a white man tip his hat to a black woman. Please understand that this is a gesture that is completely unheard of in my country, or was completely unheard of in my country at the time, and that white man was an Episcopal Bishop and the woman was my mother."

Alanna Sullivan: Most of us lack the boldness to trust something so small as a mustard seed or a tip of the hat as a way to bring about God's Kingdom. We think, surely, it takes a lot more than what we have to make things grow. We need more money. We need more education. We need more time. We need more faith to really make a difference, to make a positive impact on the world around us. We use our limitations as excuses that hinder us from partaking in the bounty of what we are called to share in, but where we see limitations or hindrances, God sees potential.

Alanna Sullivan: We turn our pockets inside out and say, "See? Nothing here." To which God replies, "Look again. There, in the fold of your pocket, nestled in the dust, is a mustard seed. Plant that and I will supply the rest."

Alanna Sullivan: With you pray with me? God of enormous realities and small beginnings, embolden our faith, give us the audacity to aim small, to plant a seed, to tip a hat with the trust that the growth of the Kingdom is yours. Amen.

Congregation: Amen.

Sally Hammel: Please join me in reading the Lord's Prayer on the back of your order of worship.

Sally Hammel: "Our Father ..."

Congregation: ... "Who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy Name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen."

Sally Hammel: Please stand as you are able and join us in singing the hymn, Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing, number 312 in the Red Princeton Hymnal.

Congregation: (singing).

Sally Hammel: So, it's Wednesday, so please join us downstairs after morning prayers for MemCafé from 8:45 to 9:45 AM. Hope to see you there. Now, let us go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

Congregation: Amen.