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Christ Church Gardiner  
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In the Gospels, Jesus is always trying to explain the Kingdom of God to us with these mysterious parables like the ones we heard today. In the first, he compares the kingdom to seed scattered on the ground that sprouts and grows. And then we get the famous parable of the Mustard Seed—the tiny seed that can grow into great shrub with large branches that spread out so that the birds can make nests and find shelter there.

Whenever I hear the parable of the Mustard Seed, I think of the ministry that a group of us started in 2014 for the Episcopal and Lutheran Churches in the Kennebec Valley. It began with an idea from the pastor and a few lay leaders at Prince of Peace Lutheran. They had this idea that since most of our churches had just a few kids and teens and not enough for a robust Christian Education program, that we should collaborate and create one program, in one location, for all of them.

So we did.... I won't go into all of the details about how it all came about, but in September of 2014, Mustard Seeds was born—a Sunday afternoon Christian Education program for toddlers to high school students and their parents, housed at Prince of Peace in Augusta, with input and support from all the Episcopal Churches in the area, including Christ Church. I was hired to be the Director of that program, and it was an amazing four years, in my opinion.

I can only speak for my family, but I hope that it was for the other families, as well. We taught the Bible and God's dream for the world through liturgy, silly songs, stories, and crafts and experiments. We went through a lot of pipe cleaners, baking soda and vinegar, glitter, and shaving cream in those years. And we ate a lot of pizza and cupcakes and ice cream together. For many of us and our children, Mustard Seeds became an important part of our faith journey—forming and even transforming us. Our shared worship and shared meals helped us to create a faith community that, at its best, reminded us that we are beloved children of God and that we have a responsibility to go out and share God's love with the world.

The program turned out to be a success, but initially it was met by a fair amount of criticism—which was really founded in fear. And understandable fear. Some people worried that the collaborating churches would lose the few kids they had on Sunday mornings. Because the program felt so much like church, that families would decide to only attend Mustard Seeds on Sunday afternoon and not attend their churches on Sunday morning. This wasn't an unfounded concern, and it did happen with some families, though we found that many of our families came to us because they weren't already part of a church and didn't know how to find it in the traditional settings.

However families and kids came to become a part of Mustard Seeds, I always believed that churches needed to realize that just having kids sitting in our pews on Sunday morning does not mean we are supporting their faith formation. The *engagement* of kids and their parents in their own faith formation had to be the priority. And the best way to do that is to provide a community that lets them experience God, ask questions, and navigate their own faith journeys in the fullest way possible.

Sometimes planting seeds can be scary. We don't know what we'll get. But like the Mustard Seed in this parable, sometimes the seed produces something wonderful that spreads and creates spaces of love and nurturing, like those branches on which those birds make their nests in the shade.

That Mustard Seeds faith community in Augusta taught me, and those who planned and dreamed with me, a lot about the boldness of sowing seeds, even in spite of fear, resistance, and an unknowing of what they would produce. But it also taught me that even if the seeds produce something wonderful, it will also die in its time. Mustard Seeds only lasted four years until, through a variety of reasons, it made sense to end the ministry.

But in the life cycle of many plants, when they die, more seeds are sown. I like to imagine all of the seeds that went out with the kids and parents who were part of that community. Where are they sowing those seeds today? Some of those families are here at Christ Church now. Others have joined other faith communities. And still others are navigating their faith journeys at home, hopefully with stories and songs and messages that inspired them at Mustard Seeds.

I can speak personally of the way that Mustard Seeds shaped my future and helped me to sow seeds right here at Christ Church. When I was finishing my formation process for the priesthood and preparing for ordination, I was approached by the Cathedral in Portland and another church in Southern Maine about serving as Assistant Rector. But my work at Mustard Seeds and the connections that I was making with the churches of the Kennebec Valley convinced me that my call was here, at one of our local Episcopal Churches. My years at Saint Matthew's, my ministry at Mustard Seeds, and my fifteen years of living in Gardiner meant that I knew a lot of the history and stories of our churches here. And I believed that my love and knowledge of this place meant that I would be a better priest and pastor here than anywhere else where I didn't have that same love and knowledge.

So I have shared with you this morning, a little bit of the story of the Mustard Seeds community, and a little bit of my own story of how I came to seek a call to ministry here at Christ Church.

As we come out of the pandemic, I think it's time for Christ Church to begin to dream about how and where and when we might sow more seeds of ministry—for our children and youth, for developing discipleship as adults, for service to the community outside our walls, for music and meaningful liturgy. All of you sitting here today have gifts and dreams to help us sow those seeds. And none of us can do that work alone.

I was interviewed by CNBC on Friday for a story about people returning to worship after the pandemic. I take it that a lot of denominations and individual churches are worried about getting people back in the pews, and the interviewer was looking for my take on that. I get that anxiety, I do. But just as I never believed that our ministry to children could be fulfilled just by having them in our pews on Sunday morning, likewise, I don't believe that the congregation just sitting in these pews means that we are doing meaningful ministry. Worshiping together is important, and our liturgy plays a vital role in making God's love known to us and allowing us space to pray, offer up thanksgivings to God, and commit ourselves to working toward God's kingdom. But if we aren't strengthening our relationships, building community, and sowing seeds of ministry, then we aren't fulfilling our mission as the Church.

I hope that each of you will be a part of dreaming dreams and sowing seeds in the months and years to come as part of this faith community. As we hear in the parables of Jesus, that's how we'll be a part of building the kingdom of God. May it be so. Amen.

