

## **Proper 12 – Year A**

**Matthew 13:31-33, 44-49a**

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Crowds, crowds, crowds...we live in an age where huge crowds are commonplace. Concerts, sporting events, and even some churches routinely draw mammoth crowds of people. Crowds are just a modern thing, however, it really surprised me to read that in the year 391 it was a regular thing for as many as 80,000 spectators to show up for the Sunday afternoon Roman games.

These were not the same sort of “great sporting events” we have today. No, these 80,000 spectators were there for the Gladiators. In event after event these might men would fight savagely as the crowd bellowed their delight and their approval at this terrible and bloody spectacle.

Who can ever forget the movie depiction of the gladiatorial games in “Spartacus” starring Kirk Douglas? Again, try to imagine this: all of those people were there just to watch the bloodbath, men butchering each other. This was “entertainment”. This was “sport”.

One of the greatest stories of the early Christian church is the true tale of a man named Telémachus. He was a monk by trade, though he did not live in a monastery with his brother monks. Instead, his monastic life was that of a hermit. He lived in the desert and kept a life of solitary devotion. He made himself available to God through divesting himself from all of those things that could distract him and draw him away from God. In his prayers, however, Telémachus became aware that God was calling him to leave his desert hermitage and go to the city of Rome.

We may be sure that to Telémachus, leaving his way of life and going to Rome was not a pleasant, or welcome, possibility. Rome, with all of its people and all its busy way of life was the very thing the monk

had fled. However, the call of God persisted and the faithful and obedient monk joined the hoards of people on the roads as they streamed into the grand city of Rome.

As foreign as the rhythm of the city was to Telémachus, he listened and watched and soon learned that the place to be for many was the site of the gladiatorial games. What he saw in that place horrified him. Never in his life had he ever imagined something so awful. The sound of the crowd was deafening as they roared, giving voice to their insatiable bloodlust as the mighty gladiators went about their deadly display of mutual destruction.

Finally, unable to take it a moment longer, Telémachus leapt from his seat. All he could think of was that these gladiators, these men who were slaughtering each other, were children of God. He ran to the arena and placed himself between the fighting men. He was cursed and tossed aside like a rag doll. Struggling to his feet, he again stood between the combatants. Now the crowd was angry! What sort of farce was this? They had not come to see some fool disrupting the games. They knew what they wanted. The only thing that would satisfy: blood.

If it took killing this man to resume the games, then so be it. They couldn't have cared less. They began to throw stones and any other objects they could find. In spite of their barrage, Telémachus did not move. The command rang out for Telémachus to leave the arena or face death. Still he remained. And then there was a flash in the sun and the sound of honed steel slicing the air. The prefect of the games had endured this long enough, and acted without guilt or hesitation. Telémachus was dead.

Then something unexpected happened. The vast arena, filled with screaming people who moments before had cried out for blood, fell silent. In an instant they realized what they were seeing: a holy man lay dead. From that day forward the gladiatorial games were no more. The act of this Christian known as Telémachus is said to have caused the Emperor Honorius to abolish the games once and for all. Telémachus was from that time a martyr and he has been remembered by Eastern Christians ever since as a holy saint. This one man loosed something in the hearts of the people by his heroic act and by his heroic death. In his moment of sacrifice he cleansed the Empire of a terrible sin. If we take anything from this story it should be this: it takes only one person to begin a reformation, and it is the smallest of

things, those unassuming actions or people, who can enact the most significant change. They need only be prepared to make the personal sacrifice to do so.

Jesus liked to use parables in his teachings. Today, we are given the “Parable of the Mustard Seed” to ruminate upon. Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took out and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of 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.”

Jesus was teaching that the Kingdom of Heaven starts from the smallest of beginnings. This was a very personal parable for Jesus. He knew what it was like to begin with nothing, to be born to humble parents, in a stable no less. He was a penniless carpenter-turned-teacher from Nazareth in Galilee. You may or may not know this, but Galileans were considered outcasts and losers. Jesus went on to gather around him plain men who, like Jesus, had nothing to distinguish them in the world. As they moved from place to place, some people listened and were convinced; some merely *used* Jesus for healing, which he generously permitted, and many, many other people simply walked away in disgust, wanting nothing to do with him. They dismissed him as a fool and a lunatic.

It is folly on our part to believe that Jesus showed up and made an instant impact, or was universally liked, or was even mostly liked. His ministry took time, and effort, and persistence. He failed, and tried again, and was still dismissed by many. H.G. Wells said it best, though, when he observed that “[Jesus] is easily the dominant figure [in history].” Jesus, however, did not think of himself in such exalted terms, nor did a lot of his contemporaries. He simply persevered. He kept on with what he was doing because he knew it was what he was meant to do. He had every reason to get discouraged, or tired, or frustrated, or fed up. But he didn’t.

He lived his life closely with twelve men to be abandoned by them in his moment of greatest need. This had to have been devastating to the human side of Jesus, in spite of his holiness. Why not just give up? If the actions of the apostles were not enough, surely the crucifixion was proof enough that even God had

abandoned Jesus. Why not just give up? Surely it was a tempting idea. But, luckily, it was not that way. Like the tiny mustard seed, you know the one. Like that tiny and mighty thing that grows into a massive tree, Jesus shows us a flame of faith that will never be extinguished, that will never give up. That flame, that faith of Jesus, has burned in countless hearts for more than two thousand years. That flame of faith burns in our hearts today.

All of us, I think, would agree that life is tough, that in the course of our lives there are things that have the potential to convince us that our only choice is to give up and give in. When these inevitable times occur we can draw upon that seed of faith that lives within each of us. The great theologian, Paul Tillich, says, "But faith means being grasped by a power that is greater than we are, a power that shakes us and turns us and transforms us and heals us. Surrender to this power is faith." Surrendering to this power is what faith is all about.

Telémachus could not bear to watch the horrendous spectacle of those gladiatorial games. To him, those "games", those men, were children of God and he believed he must draw upon his faith that was in him to act on their behalf. He died, yes, but in his martyrdom he made a significant difference. The question we must ask ourselves is this: Do I truly draw upon my "seed of faith", not just to get through the tough times, but to really make a difference in this world, here and now?

All of us, each and every one, can make a difference in some way. God put you here for that very purpose. In his dying, Telémachus made a difference. In our living, can we? Will we? It all begins with a tiny seed of faith the size of a mustard seed.

Amen.