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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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1 Kings 3:5-12, Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
On Working Flat-Out

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When we weave together our First Lesson, about young Solomon asking the Lord for wisdom, and our Gospel Lesson about the parable of the mustard seed, I think it yields this lesson for us: Let us work flat-out at whatever good lies before us, and trust the Lord to bring good from our labors. You and I might be humble people in this world, no bigger than, say, a mustard seed, but our God is able to bring something marvelous from our labors. Our part is to work with whatever wisdom, skill, and good judgment the Lord grants us, and then entrust the rest to him.

So, those are my texts for this sermon: the story of young Solomon in 1 Kings 3 and the parable of growth about the mustard seed in St. Matthew 13.

A wondrous thought: that God could use our help

Before I dive into those texts, let us pause in wonder at the idea I want to urge upon us today: That we should work flat-out at the good that lies at hand, and trust our God to bring something good from it. The amazing thought here is that God should not only notice our labors, but be glad of our help, and treasure our efforts — indeed, treasure them enough to make them into building blocks for his kingdom. He who made heaven and earth, who owns all the cattle on ten thousand hills, is glad for the little we can contribute to his cause.

¹The earth is the LORD's, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein. (Psalm 24:1, KJV)

He who could fling ten thousand planets into the universe at the snap of a finger, who grants being to everything moment by moment... this mighty God would have you and me be his helpers in this world.

If Michelangelo asked me to assist him in his workshop, I would count it an honor to drag around the marble and hand the chisel and hammer to the man. If Beethoven asked me to lay out the fresh music score, along with pen and ink, I would be glad to fetch his supplies and set them out. Far, far beyond such honors is it that almighty God, creator of heaven and earth, should bid us to lend him a hand. But young Solomon was willing to do that, asking only that that he might have wisdom for his job, and the Lord was well-pleased with him. In the same manner, you and I should believe that the Lord is well-pleased with you and me

when we offer ourselves to him by doing the best we can at whatever good lies before us.

And if it is *the Lord* who accepts our efforts and brings good from them, then it is something very fine and very important that he is building with our help. Who could believe, for example, that a well-placed nail by the roofer overhead our church could, by that work, lend something toward making this universe a better place? What is one nail? [Show examples of the 7-inch nails used in our roof.] Our new roof will take more than ten thousand pieces of slate. That means an awful lot of nails over the next five months. But that workman should be proud to think that every nail he places, every ounce of work he does with goodwill and skill, is a strike in favor of the universe! Not only is he building a new slate roof for our church, but that he is building a better world for humanity. That's because he does not labor alone. God almighty, Lord of all, is building his very Kingdom by way of the labors of little mustard seeds like you and me.

Young King Solomon

Let's turn now to young King Solomon. He teaches us that God almighty is pleased with us when we ask him for wisdom and then try to live useful and practical lives.

In today's Bible story, Solomon is earnest about his responsibilities. He is the king, though he is just a young man. He wonders whether he is up to the task. He expresses his doubts with great humility:

⁷And now, O LORD my God, thou hast made thy servant king in place of David my father, although I am but a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in.

Life has so worked out for him that he is the king, and with that position comes responsibility for the welfare of his people. Eternity will measure him on how well he governs. So, he prays for wisdom.

It is a prayer that pleases the Lord and he grants wisdom to Solomon – all the wisdom he needs. The Bible demonstrates Solomon's wisdom in two ways. First, there is the very moving story in First Kings 3 of the two women who claim the same baby. What tremendous human emotions are embedded in such a story. But Solomon wisely discerns who is the true mother and entrusts the baby to her.

The second way the Bible demonstrates the wisdom of Solomon is through the Book of Proverbs. The books starts off this way:

¹The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel:
(Proverbs 1:1, RSV)

When I was a boy on Maryland's Eastern Shore, we were given pocket-sized New Testaments right there in the public school. Perhaps some of you were too.

Mine was a King James New Testament with Psalms and Proverbs. Those days were different. I think that back then it was considered a benefit to the nation that school children should know something of Jesus, the Psalms, and the Proverbs. And, indeed, there is much practical wisdom in Solomon's Proverbs. Let me remind you of some of the Proverbs:

A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. (Proverbs 15:1, RSV)

Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it. (Proverbs 22:6, RSV)

More than all else, keep watch over your heart, since here are the wellsprings of life. (Proverbs 4:23, NJB)

A cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones. (Proverbs 17:22, RSV)

Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. (Proverbs 16:18, RSV)

Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise. (Proverbs 6:6, RSV)

So, King Solomon was a wise king and he taught wisdom to others.

But there is a caution for us in this story. Often what ails a person is not that he or she does not know the wise thing to do, but rather that he chooses to not do the wise thing. So it was with King Solomon. Especially he seems to have trouble with women – foreign women and their idols. I guess Solomon should have heeded his own Proverb about the heart:

More than all else, keep watch over your heart, since here are the wellsprings of life. (Proverbs 4:23, NJB)

Because of his entanglement in foreign love and foreign worship, God became angry with Solomon, and because of Solomon's sin, God caused the Israelite empire to crumble.¹

So, this is important: that we should seek wisdom, good practical judgment, grow in our skills, and learn from our mistakes. But this too is important: that we should *exercise* whatever wisdom we have gained over the years. We should be as

¹ *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, The First Readings: The Old Testament and Acts*: (Kindle Locations 3510-3514). Kindle Edition.

wise and as skillful and as practical as we can be, including in our relationships with other people. But then, we should be confident that God will accept the labors we offer him and bring something good from them.

There is a real sense in which you are God's hands to build something good in this world. You are God's eyes to see the suffering and the wrongs in this world and to help put them right. You are God's feet to go where you can help out. You are God's voice to give encouragement to others. Of course God could do all these things without you, without me. But he does not choose to do things that way. He would not be without us. He hopes for our help, asks for our help, treasures our help, and uses it for the upbuilding of his kingdom.

So, that is the first part of my sermon. Let's do our part, even if we be ever so humble. Let us do our work and make our decisions with as much wisdom and good judgment as we can.

Rest in the Lord

The second half of my sermon is that when we have offered our best work and our best judgment, then we can step back and admire what God is going to do: We have a mighty God! We have a great God who is well able to accomplish wonders on earth with the little bit we might have to offer.

That is the miracle of the mustard seed. It starts off so very tiny, but it ends up so very big. It starts off a seed and ends up a tree giving shelter to birds and their nests.

St. John Chrysostom suggests that Jesus teaches the parable of the mustard seed in order to encourage his disciples. His mission for them is a big one: they are to conquer the world! In the end, he will want them, and us through them, to journey to the very end of the world, win souls to him, baptize them, and teach them the faith of the church. But those disciples could well be intimidated to think of such a grand undertaking.

What shall we be able to do, twelve men, throwing ourselves upon so vast a multitude? (Homily on Matthew 13:24ff)

— Chrysostom imagines them saying.

And it is not simply that they are twelve men. It is also that they are twelve *ordinary* men. Fishermen, many of them. People of the earth. They do not have wide experience of the world. They are not learned in the languages and the cultures of the world. They are not the brave Knights of the Round Table. They are not renowned for valor. In fact, before long, they will all flee from Jesus and abandon him to his death. They are not the Board of Directors of the World. They do not sit around a conference table studying charts, working on strategies, making clever decisions, spending money, calling the shots. They are ordinary people, I say. Their one virtue is simply that they are friends with Jesus, and when they fall, they are willing to pick themselves up and try to renew their friendship with Jesus.

Yet it is these humble men who started that great and holy empire called Christ's Church on earth.

Their beginnings were humble. Villages and marshes and fishing boats. They were the mustard seeds of the world. Yet our God made something great of them.

None of them lived to see the final outcome of his life's work. Saint Peter, they say, traveled as far as Rome, but there he met his death, crucified like his Lord. When his final breath came, he probably could not imagine that he would have helped start something that would work its way through all the miles and all the ages all the way to Immanuel Lutheran Church, to this very undercroft where we worship today. But, he had a hand in it. Mustard seed that he might have been, he has been a blessing for you and me in this very place.

Likewise with you and me: We might not live to see the final outcome of our labors. We reach a certain age and look back on our life's work, and it might seem awfully modest. It might not amount to much in our own eyes. And yet at least it is a mustard seed that God will accept and one day nurture into a great tree, indeed a great kingdom of peace and health and holiness. Someday, I say, we will see it all and we will be glad we lent a hand. So, let's lend a hand! Let's leave this place with renewed determination to be as wise and skillful as we can be in the good that lies before us, confident that our God will do wonders with it, through the labors and grace and merit of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.