"Pardon Me … Do You Have Any Grey Poupon?"
Matthew 13:31; 17:20

Read Matthew 17:20, Luke 17:5

I have the sad news to report to you that summer is half over. Not officially, according to the solar calendar, but according to the school calendar, we've passed the halfway point and we're on the downhill side. And that's just sad, because I love summer. And that's not just because we have precious few months to do a lot of exterior maintenance here at the church, but more because of what summer represents. There's something about summer that proudly says, "Take it easy." It's OK to ditch the suit and tie / it's OK to relax a little / it's OK not to work quite as hard and to enjoy oneself more than any other season.

And there are all kinds of opportunities to enjoy oneself in the summertime, aren't there? Summer is a season for throwing brats or burgers on the grill outdoors / it's a season for watching the Indians or the Captains play baseball with a footlong in one hand and a cold drink in the other / it's a season when you can always find a street festival somewhere selling deep fried corn dogs and hot pretzels and all kinds of delicious goodies.

And there's one thing that all these glorious summertime experiences have in common – they're just not the same without a generous helping of that spicy yellow condiment that adds all kinds of zest to otherwise ordinary foods … of course I'm talking about the mustard! Summer and mustard are just made for one another, aren't they?

Americans have long had a love affair going on with mustard. The average American squirts 12 oz. of the bright-yellow kind on our hot dogs and ham sandwiches every year! I can probably go to any one of your refrigerators and find a bottle or two of yellow mustard tucked away on its shelves.

More sophisticated palates go for the browner, seedier mustards – the kind made famous by the TV commercial tagline: **"Pardon me … but do you have any Grey Poupon?"** But except among a few knowledgeable connoisseurs, mustard's subtleties and strengths are – for the most part - ignored. Mustard is such a common, everyday, ordinary ingredient that its importance doesn't even register with us.

But Jesus saw it differently. Jesus knew better. For Jesus, mustard presented a perfect picture of the kingdom of God and the faith of those who would be a part of that kingdom.

It is no accident that Jesus picked the mustard seed to illustrate his teachings of faithfulness as well as in his parable of what the kingdom of God is like. I'm sure most of us are quite familiar with the implications of what Jesus taught: that even just a little bit of genuine faith in God can accomplish more than we can possibly imagine. Its reputation for being the smallest of seeds creates a wonderful image for the Kingdom and its potential to grow into something truly amazing – something life-altering and world-changing. Matthew, Mark and Luke … all three gospels capture mustard's tiny, seed-sized faith that is capable of moving mountains or accomplishing miraculous feats.

But did you know that mustard really isn't the smallest seed?! There were seeds much smaller in Jesus' time than the mustard seed, and there were also trees much larger than the mustard shrub. Everyone

knew that an oak or a cedar was bigger – so why doesn't Jesus compare the acorn or the tiny seed within the cedar's cone to a small faith that accomplishes great things?

Why does Jesus choose the lowly mustard shrub rather than the mighty cedars of Lebanon? Or the great oaks of Bashan made famous by Isaiah and Ezekiel?

For certain, mustard possesses other significant qualities. Across the world, people consume 700 million pounds of mustard every year **simply because it tastes so good!** For sure, mustard's sharp, pungent spiciness adds zest and flavor to anything it's added to or slathered on. What's a hot dog at Progressive Stadium without mustard? This creamy yellow condiment just seems to make the juices flow and our mouth water. Mustard is alive, bursting with flavor and color. Go ahead and call mayonnaise bland and tasteless (you won't get an argument from me!) – but don't say that about mustard! There's an ancient story about how King Darius of Persia sent Alexander the Great a bag of sesame seeds to symbolize the vast number of soldiers in his army. In reply, Alexander sent back a sack of mustard seed, showing not only his greater number of soldiers – but also their fiery nature.

Maybe that's why Jesus chose mustard to illustrate what his Father's kingdom was like. Could it be that Jesus was implying between the lines that those who follow Jesus ought to be like mustard: alive … zesty … bursting with the flavor and spiciness of the God who has taken up residence within our hearts?

A while ago I saw the results of a survey taken listing reasons people give for not attending church. The number one reason (given by 3 out of 4 respondents) for not attending church was that (quote) **"there is no value in attending church."** In other words, most people, if they were to come to church, can't imagine how being part of a church would improve their lives or add anything to the quality of their lives. One in three persons said "Church services are usually boring." Where's the kick? Where's the spice? Where's the zest?

When I see how people flocked to see Jesus – and yet benignly ignore His Church today, it indicates that something's wrong. Have we lost our spiciness? Have we become so plain and bland about what Christ has done for us? Is the Christian life becoming synonymous with playing it safe and taking no risks? Or is our faith something we keep hidden from others – celebrating it only in the relative safety of our churches on Sunday mornings? It seems like we've drifted a long way from the mustard seed faith Jesus spoke about.

One sure fact about mustard is that **mustard is not made to be eaten alone.** It is best when doing what it was created for: helping something else achieve its true and greatest potential. If Christians are the mustard of society, we can't do much good unless we're willing to spread ourselves over society – bringing with us the life-changing flavor of Jesus Christ in our daily interactions and relationships.

But there's another important quality of mustard that most people in my generation would completely overlook. For hundreds of years, mustard has been valued not as a condiment … but as medicine! For us not to recognize that Jesus meant to include the healing qualities of mustard his analogy is to risk missing part of his point. In Jesus' day – indeed, clear up until our great-grandparent's day, **mustard meant healing, not hot dogs.**

One of the most popular and common uses of mustard was the old-fashioned mustard plaster. Anybody ever used one? Anybody ever even heard of one? Here's what your great-grandmother knew to do:

- First, mustard flour made from ground seeds was mixed with hot water into a paste (some recipes call for an egg to be added to it).
- Then the paste was liberally slathered onto a moistened cloth.
- The plaster was then laid on the patient's skin (mustard side in) to do its work

Mustard plasters could be applied to the stomach, back, chest, kidneys, all stiff and sore joints, and the head. Apparently the mustard in the compress causes blood vessels to dilate, increasing circulation and allowing the body to work more efficiently at carrying away toxins, speeding digestion, easing sore muscles, and generally accelerating the body's own healing abilities. Fevers broke, lungs cleared, headaches subsided and muscle cramps ceased when a good strong mustard plaster was applied.

The ancient historian Pliny the Elder said of mustard:

> "Pythagoras judged [mustard] to be chief of those whose pungent properties reach a high level, since no other penetrates further into the nostrils and brain. Pounded it is applied with vinegar to the bites of serpents and scorpion stings. It counteracts the poisons of fungi. For phlegm, it is kept in the mouth until it melts, or is used as a gargle with hydromel. For toothache it is chewed. It is very beneficial for all stomach troubles. It clears the senses, and by the sneezing caused by it, the head."

Frankly, I'd rather take some Benadryl (!), but maybe our great-grandmothers knew what they were talking about when they prepared mustard plasters for chest colds. From other ancient writings, there seemed to be no illness that mustard wasn't able to cure.

Curing sickness. Hmmmm. Maybe Jesus wants us as Christians not only to trust God in faith / not only to bring flavor and spiciness to those around us / **but also to be a healing agent in a sick world.**

Chuck Shawver is an ABC missionary living in Mexico City whom I met him several years ago. He told me the story of a young boy he had met on the mission field – a boy named Umberto. Umberto lived with his mother in a Mexican village carved into the side of a hill (so remote that it was a two hour walk simply to reach the nearest road.) Most Americans probably spend several times more money each year eating out than the villagers had to live on. Umberto and his mother barely eked out a living raising cows.

The two of them were walking one day to another small, though slightly larger village to do some shopping. While they were there, they were invited to an evangelistic meeting in a small church, and at the meeting both Umberto and his mother heard the gospel for the very first time. They asked Christ into their lives and became the first Christians ever in their home village. Umberto in particular had a great desire to share Christ with others in his village. This he did, in spite of opposition from most of the village whose only religious tradition was a form of animism.

But over time, very slowly, a few villagers came to Christ, and Umberto began to develop a small church in his home. He was the preacher even though he was only 16 years old, and every opportunity he could, he traveled back to the larger village to learn more about the Bible and its teachings.

Umberto realized that he could not continue to support himself and his mother by raising a few cows. He and his mother decided that they would open up a pharmacy in their home, stocking just a few rudimentary medicines which they would sell to the other villagers for a small profit. And so Umberto and his mother sold the cows, took the money and traveled again to the larger village where they spent their savings buying medicine for their village.

They were able to make a living doing this, and Umberto continued to preach and teach in his village. His church was slowly growing. Every time Umberto walked to the next village to purchase more medicines, he learned a little bit about sickness and diseases and how to treat the most common ailments that afflicted the local villagers. It was on one of these trips that Umberto first learned that a particularly deadly form of cholera was working its way up the Central American peninsula and into Mexico.

Cholera is spread by contaminated water, and so when a village is struck by cholera, it tends to affect the entire village at once, causing many deaths. Health workers went from town to town training villagers how to treat cholera, and Umberto had the chance while he was buying medicines to be trained in the treatment of cholera, and to buy the necessary medicines.

The cholera continued to spread, until it finally reached the tiny village where Umberto lived. Because of the training he had received and the preparations he had made, he was able to travel from home to home treating every villager who came down with cholera. When the epidemic passed, not a single person in Umberto's village had died, thanks to the skill, care and foresight of this young man.

You see, Umberto was "being the mustard" in his little town. He was first an agent of healing as cholera spread through the town – but as a result of the care he showed the villagers, doors in every home were opened for Umberto to look after their spiritual needs as well. Umberto shared how they also needed to be spiritually healed from their sin through Jesus. When I heard Umberto's story, his church was growing by leaps and bounds.

Now, we clearly don't live in a remote village where basic medicine is in short supply. But we do live among people who need to be healed just the same. God hasn't called us to fight sickness caused by cholera, but a different kind of sickness brought about by broken relationships, by sexual abuse, by hunger, by 2nd or 3rd generation poverty, by loneliness, by racism, by corrupt politics, by vicious gossip, by a lack of hope and a hundred other causes.

Friends … we have the medicine! We are the medicine! Jesus sent his disciples out with instructions to "preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick" (Luke 9:2) God wants you and I to spread ourselves like a mustard plaster – wherever we come into contact with the broken, the lost and the hurting, and share with them the love of God and the hope that Jesus Christ can heal their hurts and bind their wounds.

We heard last week about being salt of the earth, and light of the world. But don't forget the mustard. Don't ever forget the mustard.