

I'm indebted to Professor Jon Baer today for this homily. It brought me to tears a couple of weeks ago at Tuttle Chapel and so I asked for permission to bring it to you. I hope you find it as moving and instructional, in this time of discernment about how we move forward into 2020, as I did. Here's what Jon preached:¹

Our Scripture passage today is Luke 13:18-21: Then Jesus asked, "What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds perched in its branches." Again he asked, "What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough."

If you know anything about Texas, you know that its residents are passionate about two things in particular: high school football and law and order. Our story takes place in Grapevine, Texas, a northwestern suburb of Dallas, in November 2008. Friday night football in Texas is a ritual as old as mud, as are Saturday bragging rights. But the game that was played on this night was different. The opponents were Faith Christian School and Gainesville State School. Faith Christian had a strong 7-2 record going into the match-up, while Gainesville State was 0-8. As its name suggests, Faith Christian was a private Christian school, while Gainesville State was a maximum security prison school for juvenile delinquents. Faith Christian had 70 players, fresh-scrubbed kids from solid families; and Gainesville State had 14 players, boys who had been convicted of

¹ Jonathan R. Baer, First Christian Church, November 11, 2012, "Mustard Seeds"

felonies—armed robbery, drug offenses, assault and battery, and the like. Faith Christian had 11 coaches and the latest equipment; Gainesville State had one coach and 7-year old equipment. Faith Christian received great support from their students and families, with hundreds turning up for Friday night games; Gainesville State played every game on the road, since they didn't have a proper field at their facility. And normally no one turned up to support the Gainesville State Tornados. After all, many of the families of these teens had disowned them. As convicted criminals, the Gainesville boys traveled to and from their games in handcuffs, with 12 uniformed officers escorting the 14 players. Typically they arrived and played to catcalls, jeers, and insults. Gainesville State had scored only two touchdowns all year.

As the game approached, the Faith Christian coach, Kris Hogan, had a mustard seed idea. He emailed the Faith Christian folks—students, parents, teachers and administrators—and asked half of them to sit on the Gainesville State side of the field and cheer for their team. “Here’s the message I want you to send,” Hogan wrote, “You are just as valuable as any other person on planet Earth.” Some folks were understandably confused. One player asked Hogan why they were doing this. Hogan responded, “Imagine if you didn’t have a home life. Imagine if everybody had pretty much given up on you. Now imagine what it would mean for hundreds of people to suddenly believe in you.” Hogan later explained, “When I

saw them on the schedule, we felt like, here are 16-, 17-, 18-year old kids, and they're somebody's little boy, and they're locked up in prison. So the idea was to just give them hope, given the natural hopelessness that is normal in prison life. I wanted them to have the same experience that most every other kid in Texas gets on a Friday night."

So the Faith Christian community took hold of the idea. When Gainesville State arrived, they shared a pre-game meal with Faith Christian and heard the gospel presented, some of them for the first time in their lives. When the Gainesville State players ran out to the field, a banner awaited for them to crash through and a lengthy spirit line of students, parents, and teachers cheered them on. The Gainesville State coach, Mark Williams, said of the spirit line, "When it happened, it was dynamic. It was one of the most unbelievable things I have ever seen." One player said, "When I ran through there, it was like angels or something, I was just running through as fast as I could and I felt the wind rushing against my face."

When they reached their sidelines, there in the stands were hundreds of fans, cheering them on by name, and on the track were cheerleaders with pom-poms kicking away for the Tornadoes. As the game started, a Gainesville State boy named Alex recalled later, "I thought maybe they were confused. They started

yelling ‘Dee-fense!’ when their team had the ball. I said, ‘What? Why they cheerin’ for us?’”

Another boy, Gerald, later remarked, “We can tell people are a little afraid of us when we come to the games. You can see it in their eyes. They’re lookin’ at us like we’re criminals. But these people, they were yellin’ for us! By our names!”

Gainesville State scored the last two touchdowns of the game—as many as they had all season—perhaps because of their excitement, perhaps because Coach Hogan put in his third-stringers. They lost the game 33-14, but no matter!

Gainesville State were winners that night, and the players acted the part of champions, dousing their coach with the contents of their water bottles. One of the players later said, “It felt like we won the Super Bowl, because we won, heart-wise, spiritual-wise. We won!” Gainesville’s Coach Williams said, “I’ve been in state championship games and it’s nothing like this. Nothing!”

After the game, both teams gathered in the middle of the field to pray, and a boy named Isaiah from Gainesville State surprised everyone by asking to lead the prayer. “Lord, I don’t know how this happened, so I don’t know how to thank you,” he prayed, “but I would’ve never known there was so many people in the world that cared about us.”

As the Tornados marched to their bus under guard for the ride back, each boy was handed a bag containing a burger, fries, soda, some candy, a Bible, and an encouraging letter from a Faith Christian player.

Coach Williams grabbed Coach Hogan at that point and said, “You’ll never know what your people did for these kids tonight. You’ll never, ever know.”

As the bus pulled away, all the Gainesville State players were one on side, watching the loving waves and smiles of folks who had previously been strangers.

A Gainesville player named Mack said afterwards, “I was surprised. They were calling us by name and everything. At first we thought that they had another player with the same name. We didn’t know what to think. I felt like God was just touching upon all of us and letting us know that there’s people out there that care about you. They couldn’t care less what we was in for, the crime we committed, and they wanted to love us like their own kids.”

Another player said, “I cried. After the game when I went back to my room, I cried. You think your family are the only ones who love you. God ain’t the only one that love you. Other people love you, too.”

A third Gainesville player said, “I see the world in a different way now. I mean, I don’t just see that I’m the victim no more. I mean, so much love. I came from a broken home family, so having all that love just rose my spirits up.”

In the aftermath of the game, local coverage spread to the Internet and Coach Hogan heard from hundreds of people from around the nation and beyond, with many saying they felt inspired by Faith Christian's actions to help others. Media requests poured in, and Coach Hogan received praise from NFL commissioner Roger Goodell, among others. All this left Coach Hogan a bit flummoxed: "At the beginning, I was really surprised because I feel like it shouldn't be that big of a deal that Christians take action and do things like this," he said. "I just don't think it should be that big of a deal." Perhaps that's because the Faith Christian folks have made a habit of doing things like this. In another incident earlier in the season, when a North Side High School player was injured on the field and an ambulance crew came out to attend to him, the Faith Christian players and cheerleaders crossed the field to kneel in prayer with their counterparts on the North Side sidelines. Several Faith Christian parents went to the hospital to be with the players' family, and at least one spent the night. After his release, Faith Christian people kept in touch and provided encouragement as he recovered.

Coach Hogan may not have seen what Faith Christian did for Gainesville State as out of the ordinary, but many others did. The good news of Jesus spread through a simple act of love and grace. And this mustard seed grew into a beautiful tree, with many lovely birds perched on its branches.

At Gainesville State, the change was dramatic. Teacher Chris Styles, who had taught there for five years, came in on the Monday morning after the game and immediately noticed the difference. “The culture just switched,” he said. “The boys, a lot of them, just hadn’t had anybody care about them. When they saw that, they brought that back. And then their peers heard that these people cared about them—really cared about them, not just throwing money at them or throwing a bag of stuff at them. They actually cared about them, and they showed it through their actions.”

Gainesville State Superintendent Gwan Hawthorne said, “It’s like people’s hearts have really changed.” Students, teachers, staff all were more upbeat and positive after the game. Publicity from the game led to a flood of support for Gainesville. Phone calls and emails poured in offering donations. The owner of a sporting goods manufacturer said he would design and supply new uniforms. One Gainesville man offered to purchase a helmet and a set of shoulder pads—that’s all he could afford, but he wanted to help. An appellate court judge visited the campus and volunteered his time to help students. And during basketball season, some opposing teams followed the Faith Christian model and had fans and cheerleaders on the Gainesville side.

Even more branches grew from this mustard seed. Gainesville State faculty and staff have tough jobs, trying to teach kids who are often recalcitrant, angry,

and despairing. But months after the Faith Christian game, teacher Chris Styles said, “This is a blessing. This made us feel good that we work here. Made us feel better about our jobs.” Coach Williams said, “A lot of people are bubbling; everybody’s excited. The kids are excited. When the staff and the teachers are excited and they’re upbeat and positive, and when the kids are excited, everybody gets along better.”

Behavior and academic performance at Gainesville State among the student-inmates improved markedly after the game. To play on the football team, students must have solid grades and commit no behavioral infractions. Suddenly, Gainesville students were motivated to strive for their best, not least by watching video of the game. A Faith Christian parent who owned a video production company supplied Gainesville State with DVDs, which included the full game and freeze frames of each player, with his name and number on the screen. “We’ve watched the DVD at least 30 times,” said Mack. “I feel like the ones who did mess up, when they heard the story that we told them [and saw the DVD], now they’re gonna cherish it more and do whatever it takes not to make the same mistake again.”

Months afterwards, the Gainesville quarterback Isaiah, who prayed on the field after the game, said, “It’s like, a lot of us, we’ve always been known for what we do wrong, what we don’t achieve. But now, it’s like people recognized that we

can achieve something. Usually, people, when they wake up, they're all down. Like they ain't got nothing to live for. But when we came back from that game, after we told everybody, you could see a light in their faces. It was, like, in the atmosphere. You could feel it. It was, like, they weren't down. They were feeling up. Like, 'I can achieve something.'"

And that little mustard seed continue to grow. The following football season, Gainesville State arrived at Faith Christian to a 150-foot spirit line, 4,000 cheering fans (along with television and film crews), and "GSS" painted in one of the end zones.

Several other schools on the Gainesville schedule decided to do likewise. In the fall of 2010, two full years after the first Faith Christian game, Gainesville prepared to play Krum High School in Krum, Texas. Inspired by Faith Christian's example, local youth leader Brenda Kirk invited area churches to come out and join her church in support of Gainesville State. Local radio host Rebecca Carrell heard about the effort and promoted it on the air. Carrell said, "We really just want to show these guys the love of Christ. And we want to show these boys that they matter."

As word got out, the community stepped forward. Local businesses donated pre-game meals. Krum High School provided their visitors with a spirit line, a band and a cheer squad.

After the Krum game, new Gainesville State coach Walt Scott said, “The kids were telling me, ‘They were calling my name, my number; they were cheering for me, and I don’t even know those people.’ And that offered some encouragement to them that they have not seen probably in a lifetime.”

So the love and grace of Christ spread, like yeast through the dough. As local sportswriter David Thomas put it, “If a Texas high school football field can be a place where unconditional love can be offered—and received—then any place can.”

The lives of several of the Gainesville State players were transformed that night in November 2008. Many of them came to know the love and grace of Christ in a tangible way, and their understanding of the world about them, other people, themselves, and their future possibilities were radically reshaped for good.

Sometimes we get overwhelmed by the problems around us. There is far too much suffering, broken-heartedness, hopelessness. The evening news brings a fresh litany of tragedies, and we don’t have to look beyond our own towns or neighborhoods or perhaps even our own homes to see loneliness and despair. And what can I do about all this? I’m just one small person, struggling to carry on in a hard world. All too readily we fall into anger, cynicism, or selfishness. “If those people would just make an effort, they could improve their lives instead of sucking up our hard-earned tax dollars.” “No matter what I do, it’s not going to really make

a difference.” “I’m going to look out for myself, and get what I can, because that’s the way the world works and I’ve got to protect me and mine.”

There’s a better way. It’s a narrow path, and all too few travel it. It seems a hard road, full of pitfalls; a foolish road, where lives are found when they are lost for the sake of others. I don’t know that I can do that; the burdens may be too heavy. But here’s the thing: the very one who has told us, “I am the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6), is the same one who has promised to carry our burdens (Psalm 55:22; Isaiah 53:4). When we are weak, his strength will abide: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9).

And thankfully we need not walk the path alone with Jesus; there are other pilgrims who can inspire, encourage, and strengthen us for the journey as they rely upon the Lord. Over there are the Apostles Paul, Peter, James and the others, and there’s Mary Magdalene. Look farther and we see the Faith Christian brothers and sisters, and lo and behold they’ve brought some of the Gainesville State folks with them. But look a little more carefully still, because sometimes it’s hardest to see the things right around you. There’s a sister in Christ working with the FISH food pantry; and over there’s a brother teaching people basic math so they can get their GEDs. And the burden lightens, hope grows, and love overflows.

We often wonder what our society and world need. More charitable giving, better government programs, laws that are more just. Well, yes, those things are

important and we can't neglect them. But when you get down to it, it's really much more simple than that, isn't it? But also much more demanding. It's not a matter of just writing another check, giving a couple hours here or there, paying more in taxes for new programs.

You see, it's about love. Love is the greatest power in the world. Oh, it often seems that hatred, selfishness, and despair have won the day, but don't be deceived. Love is the greatest power in the world. It alone can change hearts, and minds, and lives, and welcome people onto that narrow way that leads to life abundant. It alone can provide hope that abides, grace for today, strength for the journey. The Light has come into the world, and though men love darkness, the darkness shall not overcome it (John 1:5; John 3:19). Perhaps we don't see it in our lives today or in the world around us, but have faith, my friends. Christ is victorious. Love wins.

And that's not only true at some point in the future, when Christ returns and the kingdom of God is fully consummated. It's true today. It's true as we walk the pilgrim path with the faithful. If we have eyes to see and ears to hear, we'll perceive it. It may seem the music of this world—that jangling, jarring, discordant sound—is all there is, but listen carefully. Do you hear it? That choir of angels, that great crowd of witnesses singing praises to our God. Attune your ear, and

follow that beautiful, loving music as it leads us on the way of life. As we go, we'll find that it grows louder and clearer, providing ever more hope and faith and love.

God's people are in the business of planting mustard seeds, of spreading yeast through the dough. If we faithfully plant, God will provide the rain and sunshine of the Holy Spirit, and the kingdom of God will grow. A kind word here, a gracious act there, a note of encouragement or a forgiving embrace. Mustard seeds, yeast through the dough, to God's glory and praise. **Amen.**