

“Where did *you* come from?” Those five words changed my life. When I entered my Junior year at Northgate High School in Walnut Creek, California, I was sixteen years old and—as I saw myself—was not terribly special. I had taken standard classes and earned mostly B’s. I was on the swim team and swam unremarkably. I played the saxophone and was, at best, always second chair. I had a loose collection of friends from my childhood but was in transition out of one “friend group” and had not yet found the next. And with girls I seemed to be perpetually stuck in the dreaded “friend zone”. Therefore, in my first week in English III, when our teacher, Mr. Friss, instructed us to write a short essay about something—I don’t remember about what—I expected no great result. Imagine my shock when, as the graded papers were returned, I saw at the top of my paper a large “4.0” (Mr. Friss graded on a four-point GPA scale)—with an exclamation mark. Mystified, reading downward, I found voluminous, enthusiastic comments and probing questions inscribed in his standard purple-ink pen. (Mr. Friss never used a red pen: to him, remarks in red were unavoidably and unnecessarily harsh.) Even more shockingly, after the papers were returned, Mr. Friss asked a few of our classmates—including me—to stand in front of the class and to read what we had written as if we were some kind of exemplars. When the class-bell rang and we shouldered our backpacks to move to the next class, he pulled me aside, looked at me with beaming eyes, and said, as if he had found a precious diamond in the rough, “Where did *you* come from?”

I still don’t know why Mr. Friss said it; I still don’t know what I had done to trigger his affirmation. As is so often the case with good teachers, it may have been more about what his positive vision imputed to me than how I actually performed. But suddenly and ever since, I began to think that maybe I could write and maybe even have something to say. In his five short words, a doorway and a future opened that would otherwise have been invisible and unexplored. Because of his five words, I applied to schools I never would have considered, engaged in adventures I never could have envisioned, found treasures I never

could have imagined, and discovered a life that would otherwise never have happened—especially the life I now share with you whom I love so much. Such small things: five short words. Maybe you have had an experience like that. Maybe you, too, have heard even a brief, epiphanic voice of affirmation and delight that changed the way you thought of yourself and thereby changed your life’s course—maybe from a teacher, or a coach, or hopefully a father. We thank God for such voices. But even if we have heard them, maybe especially now we need to hear an even small, short voice of affection, delight, and encouragement: “Where did *you* come from?”

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus famously says that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed: even though it is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, when it is sown it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, and it produces branches so great that the birds perch under its shadow (Mark 4:32). As is the case with all His teaching parables, Jesus is talking about Himself. The sixth century Bishop of Rome Saint Gregory the Great said that “Christ Himself is the grain of mustard seed, who, planted in the garden of the sepulcher, grew up a great tree; He was a grain of seed when He died, and a tree when He rose again.” Far be it from me to challenge St. Gregory the Great, but our Lord’s core identity as the Mustard Seed cannot be limited to His death and Resurrection; it must reach backwards to His Incarnation and forwards to His Ascension and even to Pentecost. The Lord God, the Creator and Maker of all, whose command brought into being “the vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses, and this fragile earth (Eucharistic Prayer C, BCP p. 370),” vacated His glory to be conceived by the Holy Spirit, to be planted as the tiniest embryo in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and to be born as a helpless infant. For thirty years He lived a small, completely normal life as one of us in every way. Then, after three years of activity that were certainly locally remarkable but globally invisible, He died as every human being must, except that He was gruesomely executed on the Cross like the

lowest criminal. Three days later, He rose from the dead. Having conquered death forever, He promised that He would likewise raise everyone who puts their trust in Him, and then Ascended back to the Throne He possessed from before the beginning of time. From that Heavenly Throne, He sent and still sends the Holy Spirit to His Church, first at Pentecost and then to every person who is baptized, confirmed, and receives His Flesh and Blood in the consecrated Bread and Wine at the Altar. Being planted in each of us personally and all of us as His Church, we are the great tree that grows and spreads and plants yet more seeds in each new generation of believers, young and old. All these things happened and are happening because in Christ God made Himself as small as a mustard seed that later and slowly changed and is still changing and renewed and is still renewing the world and everyone in it. All these things happened to bring to fulfillment what Christ said and imputed to us when He said five small words with the single greatest meaning: “The Kingdom is within you (Luke 17:21).”

But while Christ did these things to heal, forgive, and save every man, woman, and child who has ever lived, He also did it for you as if you were the only person who ever lived. We are not tools God uses to do His work to build His Church; we are not useful objects God has forged to help Him accomplish His divine project of re-creation and redemption. We are His children, His beloved, His delight. We are, as the Psalmist writes, “The apple of His eye (Ps. 17). God is smitten with you, and when He looks at you with perfect love, His gaze changes you, heals you, and makes you grow like a plant that drinks in the sunlight. In the span of human history and among the billions upon billions who have lived in it, from time to time we may feel so small as to be insignificant and invisible. But if we are small, we are small like mustard seeds, beloved by God Who delights in simply seeing us grow in our awareness of how much He loves us. As we grow in our belovedness, we naturally outpour our joy on others whom we are called to love as we are loved. The world is not an Engineer’s

workshop in which our life is an inscribed, controlled, cold and flat blueprint. The world is God's Garden in which we are living plants who drink in His life from above. Pulsing with God's grace, freedom, and endless possibilities, we constantly grow in ways that are always surprising; we are always surrounded by invisible doors that lead to unimaginable futures, and He leads us to them.

You are from God, made by Him for Him out of sheer, abundant love. You are on your way to God in Whom you will find healing of every pain, rest from every worry, fulfillment of every yearning, and deep, endless belonging. And all the way to God is God, Who walks with you as He escorts you to Himself, for He said, "I am the Way." And when we finally see Him with all the saints and angels and every person we have ever loved, He will look at us with eyes beaming with pride, affection, and joy and say to us, having always beheld us but as if seeing us for the first time, "Where did *you* come from?" And then, hand in hand, we will walk through the door with Him and in Him continue our endless exploration of love.