

Mustard seeds

To be a follower of the one who promised that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed is to expect a blessed in-breaking of peace.

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [March 18, 2015](#) issue



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Jonathan Swift observed that “we have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another.” I have thought about Swift’s maxim over the years, especially in the midst of church conflicts that became hateful. I’ve thought about it recently with the almost daily news of lethal, religion-inspired violence: the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre, the deadly shooting in Copenhagen of a Jewish man, the executions of Muslims and Christians by the so-called Islamic State, and the incidents of anti-Semitism in France.

Over the years I’ve read the Beatitudes often and am always stunned when I come to the end: “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all

kinds of evil against you on my account.”

In my sheltered, secure, and privileged context, I cannot imagine the horror of such persecution and can only hope that somehow those 21 Christians executed in Libya could remember these words of Jesus and be comforted by them.

Is it inevitable that the religious impulse in human beings sooner or later turns violent? The violence is there, from Yahweh’s instructions in the oldest Hebrew literature to eliminate all the inhabitants standing in the way of the conquest of the Promised Land, to Muslims massacred by Christian crusaders, to our own day.

Is there no other side to this grim tale? It seems to me that to be a follower of the one who promised that the kingdom of God is like leaven in a loaf or like a mustard seed is to hope and expect a blessed in-breaking of peace.

I experienced a moment of such in-breaking recently when I was asked to lecture in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Tulsa has a history of racial conflict and violence. It is sometimes called the buckle of the Bible Belt—a designation not usually associated with religious tolerance and interfaith collaboration. But the Knippa Interfaith/Ecumenical Lecture Series, named for the late Clarence Knippa, is a remarkable, lively, and flourishing enterprise.

Knippa, who was pastor of Grace Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod), was described by his successor as “an effective and courageous community leader who had a vision of a just and decent society.” He became friends with Jewish, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and mainline Protestant leaders, and they met together in the 1950s to initiate interfaith conversation groups across the city.

The lecture series began in 1988, and Grace Lutheran Church still hosts it. The atmosphere was remarkable. The event gathered people committed to interfaith relations, respect, tolerance, and understanding. After the lecture, in conversations with Jews, Muslims, and Christians, I thought about something Hans Küng once said: “There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions.”

A small event, like a mustard seed or leaven in a loaf, starts the dialogue.