

# PASSING MUSTER

Sermon, June 13, 2021

Texts: II Corinthians 5:6-17; Mark 4:25-34

Six years ago last May, a new word was officially added to the Merriam-Webster dictionary: "Eggcorn". An eggcorn is defined as a word or phrase that is mistakenly used for another word or phrase because it sounds similar and seems logical or plausible. Take those little things that fall from oak trees in the fall. They're acorns, but they sometimes get called EGGcorns. And why not? They're kind of egg-shaped, and they are the "eggs" from which new oak trees hatch ... hence, eggcorn. Some other quick examples of eggcorns: "*Spread like wildflowers*" is an eggcorn when used instead of the correct metaphor "*spread like wildfire*." After all, wildflowers can spread quickly, too, but with far less damaging effects. "*Coldslaw*" is an eggcorn if you meant "*coleslaw*" as coleslaw is usually served cold. "*Self phone*" is an eggcorn of "*cell phone*," which makes perfect sense ... a cell phone is your personal "self" phone. "*Getting a new leash on life*" is an eggcorn of the correct phrase "*getting a new lease on life*," as both carry the connotation of getting a measure of renewed control of one's life circumstances. "*Scandally clad*" is an eggcorn of "scantily clad" ... and it makes sense; being scantily clad can be scandalous.

The sermon title, "Passing Muster", is sometimes eggcorned into "passing mustard." No, passing the mustard is something we'll be doing at the picnic this afternoon. The derivation/origin of "Passing Muster" is from the military world ... when the troops are **mustered**, they are being assembled for inspection, for a review. A soldier who passes that review, that inspection, was said to "pass muster." Passing muster came to mean measuring up to a certain standard, i.e. passing approval. Now, we've also all heard the phrase "cut the mustard," which means relatively the same thing. One who cuts the mustard has measured up, passed approval, shown his/her worth and/or ability. One *passes muster* and one *cuts the mustard*, but **passing mustard** is a bit of an eggcorn. It does make some sense in an eggcornish way ... if you've cut the mustard, you've passed muster.

And I **relish** this opportunity to help you **ketchup** with these new developments in the English language.

*Pass the muster* has been around longer than *cut the mustard*, but as mentioned, both mean relatively the same thing ... to perform satisfactorily, to suffice; to be good or effective enough. Why "*cutting mustard*" is an idiom used in this manner is unclear. One theory is that "cutting" has also long been used to mean "exhibiting," as in the phrase "cutting a fine figure" ... a person who cuts a fine figure is someone who looks good, who has a sharp appearance. So, the theory goes, someone who is "*cutting the mustard*" is exhibiting or displaying one's ability or capability to look good, and/or do something well. Another theory: Mustard plants are hard to cut down, because they are big and tough and stringy and grow densely, so "*cutting the mustard*" successfully in this sense involves displaying a measure of strength and tenacity and persistence. Another theory of origin is that it comes from the preparation of culinary mustard: Mustard is "cut" (as in "*diluted*"), made more palatable, by the addition of water and vinegar. So, "*cutting the mustard*" in this sense is making some thing or some situation more palatable or pleasing or even livelier by your presence or efforts. As best I can determine, nobody really knows the origin of the idiom "*cut the mustard*"; we just know it means to be good or effective enough, to perform satisfactorily ... to pass muster.

There was a popular 1951 hit song by Ernest Tubb and Red Foley called "*Too Old to Cut the Mustard*."<sup>1</sup> A year later, 1952, Marlene Dietrich and Rosemary Clooney made a bigger hit with a parody of that song.<sup>2</sup> The chorus of theirs went like this: "*Too old, too old; He's too old to cut the mustard anymore (2X)*". Stanza One, sung by the sultry German star Marlene: "*Once I kissed a millionaire, Ran my fingers through his hair, The whole thing turned out pretty grim, 'Cause none of his hair belonged to him!*" (Chorus) Stanza Two, sung by Rosemary: "*A gent I know with a big sedan, Swore he was an army man, But he got dressed up fit to kill, In the uniform he wore at Bunker Hill.*" (Chorus), Third stanza, by Marlene: "*I entertained an actor I know, The moon was high and the lights were low, He said I'd like to play this scene, But it's time to drink my Ovaltine.*" (Chorus) (BTW, if you know what Ovaltine is, you may be getting too old to cut the mustard yourself!) They joined together on the last stanza: "*It seems that every man you meet wants to sweep you off your feet. But gals, before you do submit, Make him show his birth certificate.*"

Well, in today's epistle, Paul tells us in so many words that through the grace of Jesus Christ we are never too old, too young, too uneducated, too poor, too *anything* to pass muster or to cut the mustard! In Jesus Christ, today and any day can be a new starting point. If there are some regrets about our lives up to this point, something not passing muster, well, our lives can be forgiven, redeemed, renewed. "*If anyone is in Christ*," writes Paul, "*he is a new*

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-l2GqSkA6U>

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0kEBlmSX904>

creation." In Jesus Christ, today can be a new starting point for any of us. We can offer ourselves to Jesus Christ this day and ask Him for help in making up for lost time, in showing love to any we may have hurt or offended, and/or in setting the right kind of example for those who look to us; in short, in seeking His help and grace to help us cut the mustard AND pass muster from this day forward!

In years past I shared with you one of the **Family Circus'** more memorable Father's Day cartoons that really hit me between the eyes. Dad is depicted relaxing in his recliner reading the newspaper. He turns to see little Billy carrying his ball, bat and glove. Billy says, *"Anytime you're ready, Daddy, I'll be sitting outside growing older."* Ouch; I've been there more often than I care to admit. I still wince when I remember how Steve in his much younger years would ask me to have catches with him; many times I said, "Yes", but there were times I said "No" because I was too tired, too stressed ... or too lazy ... to do anything but sit in my recliner. One time I remember feeling especially guilty was when I heard this THUMP .... THUMP ... THUMP on the outside steps. I looked up from my chair to try and see what was causing this thumping, and saw little Steve had very creatively figured out a way to bounce the baseball on the front steps in such a way that it would pop back to him, enabling him to have a catch with himself! And I sat there thinking with each thump -- *"I'm just not (THUMP) passing muster (THUMP) as a father."*

We parents want to be the best we can for our children, we want to have time and energy for them, we want to cut the mustard or pass muster as parents as in everything else we do in life, but we have limitations, we have shortcomings, we have faults, we have tempers, we grow tired and preoccupied, we have struggles of our own .... but most parents nevertheless do want our children to have the best. And not just for selfish purposes, as Phyllis Diller once put it, *"I want my children to have all the things I couldn't afford. Then I want to move in with them."* Despite all our shortcomings, though, what we should never grow tired of is giving our children (and all our loved ones, for that matter) the example of our integrity and honor. Scottish poet William Soutar wrote, *"If I have been privileged to catch a more comprehensive view of life than many other men, it is because I have stood on the shoulders of my parents."* The truth of the matter is that all of us stand on the shoulders of our parents ... and the straighter and taller and truer our parents stood, the better view of life we have been privileged to enjoy. And in parenting as in all things, we are never too old to keep trying to do our best to stand taller, to display our integrity, and otherwise try to pass muster.

In our Gospel text, Jesus says *"This is what the Kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground."* Jesus is not giving us a lesson on agriculture; randomly scattering seeds doesn't always lead to a good harvest, but He is telling us something about the kingdom of God works. The very tiniest of seeds that are sown can go on to produce an enormous harvest, so get out there; be an old sow and sow and start sowing your good deed seeds wherever and however you can ... seeds of kindness, selflessness, generosity, faithfulness, love and service ... it is never too late! Not all seeds will take root and produce, but some will! Growth happens, even if we can't always see it. Jesus continues, *"The seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain -- first the blade and then the ear, then the full grain in the ear."* Centuries later we still don't know what causes a seed to sprout. Agriculturists and scientists have yet to be able to create a synthetic seed that grows. Growth is a divine mystery. Our task is to go out and scatter good deed seeds, and trust God for the growth. Starting now.

I've mentioned this 4-5 times over the years, and I'll probably mention this 4-5 times more before I retire from this pulpit, but I've always liked the sign at a tree nursery which advertised, *"The Best Time To Plant a Tree ... Was 25 Years Ago."* Then below that line it read: *"The second best time to plant a tree ... is right now."* Yes, if you planted apple seeds years ago; you would be eating and enjoying lots of fruit today. In like manner, there are all sorts of things we could have or should have done differently in our lives decades ago, years ago, months ago, even days ago ... hours ago ... things which, if we had done them or said them, would be producing great fruit in our lives today. However ... the *second* best time to sow seeds is right now. Today. We can't go back twenty-five years and sow what should have been sowed back then. We wish we could, but we can't. But we *can* get busy scattering good deed seeds right now! Jesus goes on to say, *"What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, with such large branches that the birds of the air make nests in its shade."* If Jesus spoke in eggcorns, He might have added, *"So, get out there and pass mustard!"*

From tiny seeds as small as the mustard seed big things can and DO happen that can go on to benefit many! We never know how something we might do, however small, might affect someone else. We may not even think that what we said or did was all that important, but to another person it might make a world of difference. Jesus taught us the kingdom of God is like that. Little things can make a world of difference. In fact, great things happen from small beginnings. God is at work, He causes growth, and He still works in mysterious ways. Are there some seeds we could be planting today? Some word of love, some act of encouragement, some seed of kindness you could scatter or pass on today? Pass mustard! It's never too late to start.