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 Parables of Jesus

***Mustard Seed Faith***  
***Matthew 13:31-32***

*He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a **mustard seed** that someone took and sowed in his field; <sup>32</sup> it is the **smallest** of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the **greatest** of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the **birds** of the air come and make nests in its branches.”*

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Here we are with another ***odd parable of Jesus***.

A parable is ***more than a metaphor or allegory***—  
 it’s a ***unique story*** used by Jesus to teach his followers about the kingdom of God.  
 Parables makes us evaluate our lives.

So as we hear the story of the mustard seed,  
 we should be looking for ***layers upon layers*** of meaning.  
 For ***strange details, and mysterious*** turns.

***If we reduce*** this parable to just a ***‘rule’ or ‘moral lesson’***,  
 we run the risk of missing God’s work in the world!

If it’s just a ***‘rule’***, ***we miss all the other meaning in it***.

So let’s ***open*** our hearts and eyes.

***Let’s open our lives to the power of this parable*** that Jesus told over 2000 years ago, because it is a story that he wants to ***use in our lives*** today.

So, what do you ***think Jesus is saying in this story?***

Let’s first consider the context.

This parable is told ***alongside another story about yeast in flour***.

Jesus said: “*The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with<sup>[e]</sup> three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.*”

So, Jesus tells two stories about something very small,  
 growing into something much larger.

And we have two stories about the ***action of one person affecting lots of people***.

The bread from the leavened flour ***will feed numerous people***.

The ***mustard shrub will become a tree***,

and the birds of the air will come and make nests in its branches!

So *one person's faithful action*---will affect a *whole community*.  
 Isn't that an important layer to the story?  
 Isn't that a pretty significant detail?  
 What you do, what I do, makes a big difference in our world!  
 What we do *affects the whole community* around us.  
 This is why we are studying Jesus' parables,  
 as a way of learning about community: "*We*" *instead of just 'me'*.

But we also have two stories about something small  
 being put into something larger, for it to grow.  
 Tiny bits of yeast worked into flour makes bread.  
 Tiny mustard seeds sowed into a field grow into a large shrub.  
 Just look at what happens when something small is allowed to grow!  
 Now that's a *powerful statement about the kingdom of God!*

What if the kingdom of God changes us—that much?  
 A bit of yeast turning into bread...a tiny seed growing into a tree.  
 What if the kingdom *is about transformation?*

But this kingdom is *beyond what we can control*, right?  
 The woman just kneads in that yeast, the man just plants the seed---  
*What happens next is beyond their control.*

In other words, *the kingdom of God is beyond our control*.  
 Think about that for a minute.  
 Isn't that something we should remember?  
 That the kingdom of God is beyond our control?  
 It's *God's kingdom* after all, not ours.

This reminds me of how *subversive Jesus' parables really were*,  
 especially in his day and time.  
 His people were under Roman rule.  
 They were expected to give honor to Caesar, not God.  
 The emperor was known as the "Son of God."  
 And then Jesus shows up, as the *TRUE Son of God, to usher in a NEW kingdom!*

Talk about *subversive! And radical! And dangerous!*  
 We forget that Jesus was crucified for these radical ideas.  
 What does that mean for us *today?*

Do we simply believe that *Jesus was a radical guy* in his day and time?  
 Don't we believe that *we are supposed to follow* in his footsteps?  
 What does *THAT look like*?  
 What does it mean for us to live like the kingdom of God is a tiny seed,  
*growing* like gangbusters?  
 What does it mean for us to live like the kingdom is *transforming our lives*?  
*IS IT transforming your life?*

Does what you *hear on Sunday*,  
 What you *hear from God in prayer* each day,  
 What you *read from scripture in* your Bible study,  
 What you *talk about with your friends* in the body of Christ,  
 Does it *transform* your life?  
 Does it make you *think, act, and live DIFFERENTLY?*

That is the *ULTIMATE question of faith*,  
 And the question posed by all these parables about the kingdom of God!  
 Is the kingdom of God breaking into your life?  
 Is it changing us--as a *community* of believers?

Are we so changed by our faith that we can't contain our enthusiasm?  
 Are we so changed that we *want everyone in the world to know Jesus*?  
 And follow him?

And do we know what it means to *truly follow*?  
 If Jesus was a radical, revolutionary guy,  
 Who spoke truth to power, what about us?

Do we understand that following Jesus today is *also dangerous, and radical*?  
 Isn't it a threat to our world today,  
 just as Jesus was a threat to the establishment then?  
 And we can easily find it hard to stand up  
 for who Jesus is and what he taught us to *believe and say and do*.

It's far easier to *just believe that "Jesus loves me"*.  
 And to see that as the epitome of the Gospel.  
 It's easier to *just show up sometimes to church, and soak it all in for an hour*.  
*Then go home*.

It's another thing altogether to *let it change you*.

The truth is—***LIVING LIKE Jesus is the point of being a Christian.***

And that means turning the world upside down all around us.

It means turning our lives upside down, and often our relationships.....

If we think being a Christ-follower is easy, we are mistaken.

***Being a Christ-follower is NOT easy.***

It's dangerous, it's sacrificial.

But it is also the pathway to *meaning*.

And *purpose*.

It is the way to be *impactful*.

And, *joyful*.

***So, which would we rather have? Easy OR life-changing?***

***Easy, OR meaningful, purposeful, impactful, and joyful?***

Remember the story last week?

Of the merchant who in his joy sold everything for the greatest pearl?

Are we living like that? ***All-in?***

Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is ***like a mustard seed***.

What's so ***special*** about mustard seeds?

They are in fact, ***very small***.

Not the smallest seed in the world, orchids and cypress seeds are smaller, but remember that Jesus uses ***hyperbole*** to teach and preach.

***Mustard in the ancient world*** was one of those wild little plants that could grow and spread very quickly.

So, over the years, some have suggested that mustard was a nuisance plant, a ***weed***.

But many sources reveal that it was actually quite helpful in those days.

And if Jesus considered it a weed, he probably would have said so, since he told another parable about the weeds and the wheat.

So, mustard was ***utilitarian***.

It was used as a ***spice***.

And it was used ***medicinally***, especially for stomach troubles—we see that in Greek and Roman sources beyond the Bible.

Listen to this Roman writing of Pliny from the time of Christ:

***Pounded it is applied with vinegar to the bites of serpents and scorpion stings.***

... *For phlegm it is kept in the mouth until it melts, or is used as a gargle...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; it ... it **promotes health*** (Pliny, Natural History, 20.87.236-237; in Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 380).

So what do *mustard seeds say about the kingdom of God?*

Well, we know that Jesus didn't say anything by accident!

So what if the kingdom of heaven is useful? And healing?

Maybe even good for the gut?

In the ancient world,

the gut was the origin of emotions and thinking.

So maybe there's something to be said

about the *medicinal powers of the kingdom of God!*

And then we have the part about *the birds of the air coming to nest in the branches* of the mustard tree.

Now, truth be told, mustard is more of a large shrub, but Jesus uses hyperbole.

And when he says that the birds can nest in it—

what if he's reminding us that the kingdom is *not about "me"*.

*It is about "We"*.

It's about *community*.

About welcome.

About inclusion.

This is a place for everyone.

So, we have these *great stories about tiny things growing like crazy*.

Being transformed into something bigger, useful, healing, powerful,

And life-giving to the whole community!

*Great! Sign me up, right?*

I want this kingdom of God—as we say in the Lord's Prayer—

*thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

I want to be a part of a kingdom where even the  *tiniest bit of good*

will grow into something big and amazing. Every time.

Because that's what Jesus is saying, right?

Or is it more mysterious than that?

Mustard seed faith is great, but *it's not a formula, is it?*

I mean, is it true that a little bit of faith

will *automatically grow* into something big?

Jesus himself *saw people turn away* from his teaching and preaching.  
***One of his own*** disciples betrayed him!

And some who followed and accepted him, *shouted crucify him* later.  
 My guess is that Jesus' disciples—the very men who saw his miracles up close and personal—that they *too had their own doubts* about this kingdom of God.  
***Because it's not a formula.***

They thought that following Jesus meant overthrowing Roman rule.  
 They may have thought they would garner status or riches by following Him.  
 They probably thought they would be rewarded in some way, right?

***But instead the kingdom grows mysteriously.***

When that seed is in the ground—we can't see what's happening.  
 And then we have to ***WAIT for the results.***  
 The kingdom is here, and coming.  
 It is already here by the power of Jesus,  
 but it's not yet fully realized this side of eternal life.

***So we just keep planting seeds.***

And praying.  
 And studying.  
 And gathering.  
 And worshiping,  
 And serving—all in His name.

***Even when we can't see the growth.***

Even when *we can't believe that anything good is going to come of it at all.*

Scott Hoezee, at Calvin Theological Seminary, wrote this:

*And so as bearers of God's kingdom, we keep plugging away at activities which may look silly or meaningless to the world but which we believe contain the very seed of a new creation. We keep coming to church and singing our old hymns, ...All of us who preach keep cracking open an ancient book called the Bible, looking to find within it truths that are anything-but ancient. We keep gathering at sick beds and death beds and whisper our prayers for the Spirit...to be with us in life and in death. We keep drizzling water onto squirming infants and popping cubes of white bread into our mouths in the earnest faith that through the Spirit, baptism and communion don't just mean something, they mean everything. And we keep working for Jesus in this mixed-up, backward world of ours. We quietly carry out our jobs and raise our kids and tend our marriages in the belief that God has designs for all those things and it's our job to follow them. We keep*

pointing people to **an old rugged cross**, having the boldness to suggest that the man who died on that cross is now the Lord of the galaxies.

<http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek/viewArticle.php?aID=1072>

**So--what are we called to do as we leave this place?**

We keep **seeking the kingdom of God**---in our everyday, ordinary lives.

Yeast and mustard are just ordinary things.

That can grow into such amazing things.

But it's not in our control.

We don't make it grow.

That's what's beautiful about how Mark begins this parable--Jesus starts by saying:

*"The kingdom of God is as if someone would **scatter seed** on the ground,<sup>27</sup> and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, **he does not know how**..."*

In other words, **God makes the growth in the kingdom.**

Our job is **faithfulness.**

And **hope.**

How are you doing—at the hope these days?

Feeling glass **half-empty** or half-full?

**What if Jesus** is prescribing a certain perspective for us?

A **hopeful** one---an **expectant** one—a **growing** one—

That even what is small is worthwhile in God's hands!

Think about some of Jesus' other stories...a lost coin, a tiny pearl...

Jesus loves **small** things!

The question is, **do we?**

The world says that bigger is better.

Jesus says ---**not in God's kingdom.**

In God's kingdom, there is a different math.

And, what if sometimes **WE are the mustard seeds?**

And we are seeking other **mustard seeds** around us?

Can we see small things—and the **great possibilities?**

**You know who was great at this? Mother Teresa.**

She opened an orphanage with a mustard seed vision.

She told her superiors, "I have *three pennies* and a dream from God to build an orphanage."

Her superiors said---you cannot build anything with three pennies!

"I know," she said, smiling,

"but with *God* and three pennies *I CAN do ANYTHING.*"

Mother Teresa had a lot to say about small things in the kingdom of God.

She said: "Be *faithful in small things* because it is in them that your strength lies."

"If you can't feed a hundred people, then feed *just one.*"

"We can do no great things, only *small things with great love*"

Wow.

*What if we lived with that kind of mustard seed faith?*

What if we lived with that hope and expectation--  
that the kingdom of God—is here, and coming?

That kind of hope doesn't just make us *feel better*,

It makes us *live better*.

It makes us *live like Jesus*.

Friends, hear the *Good News* of the Gospel:

*May we have mustard seed faith--And watch the kingdom grow.*

For this, all God's people can say together, Amen.