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What's God's Kingdom Like?

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-46 & 2 Kings 4:1-7

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1 Now the wife of a member of the company of prophets cried to Elisha, "Your servant my husband is dead; and you know that your servant feared the Lord, but a creditor has come to take my two children as slaves." **2** Elisha said to her, "What shall I do for you? Tell me, what do you have in the house?" She answered, "Your servant has nothing in the house, except a jar of oil." **3** He said, "Go outside, borrow vessels from all your neighbors, empty vessels and not just a few. **4** Then go in, and shut the door behind you and your children, and start pouring into all these vessels; when each is full, set it aside." **5** So she left him and shut the door behind her and her children; they kept bringing vessels to her, and she kept pouring. **6** When the vessels were full, she said to her son, "Bring me another vessel." But he said to her, "There are no more." Then the oil stopped flowing. **7** She came and told the man of God, and he said, "Go sell the oil and pay your debts, and you and your children can live on the rest." (2 Ks. 4:1-7 NRSV)

31 He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; **32** 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." **33** He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." ... **44** "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. **45** "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; **46** on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. (Mt. 13:31-33, 44-46 NRSV)

1

When I was a teenager there was a singing group called the Commodores. The refrain to one of their songs went like this: "I'm easy like Sunday morning." For the life of me I could not see how being "easy" was like "Sunday morning"? In my experience Sunday mornings entailed a different pace from the other days of the week. When I was younger and Sunday "blue laws" were still in place, there was not much you could do on Sunday - except go to church and visit with your friends. When I became a teenager and had a driver's license tucked in my pocket, Sunday afternoons were not much different from Saturday afternoons...except Monday was coming and homework had to get done. If the songwriter was trying to draw me in by his simile, it did not work for me.

I remember another familiar simile from when I was a kid. Boxer Mohammed Ali would dance around and say as he shadowboxed, "I float like a butterfly and sting like a bee." Now that simile made more sense to me because watching him dance around the ring looked somewhat butterflyesque...and I had no trouble imagining his punches felt like being stung.

Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed someone took and sowed in his field..." I am not aware of ever seeing a mustard bush, much less a mustard

seed. Do you suppose Jesus' listeners that day understood his simile any more than I do? Well, let's think about a mustard seed and see, not just what it may have meant in Jesus' day, but what conclusions we can draw for our own lives.

2

I am told that a mustard seed is really small. I am also told that when a mustard seed is planted it grows into a fairly large bush...surprisingly large considering the size of the seed. And I suppose that is what Jesus' simile meant. The kingdom of heaven can have very small and modest beginnings...say a kind word here, a generous act there, an act of forgiveness, a word of encouragement. But these seemingly insignificant and modest beginnings can lead to much bigger things.

When I was in seminary a buddy and I scraped and painted wrought-iron railings at an apartment complex in order to make a little money. Fun work! As is common when you spend hours painting side-by-side with someone, you talk about all sorts of things. One day the conversation ranged to Montreat, NC, home to a beautiful Presbyterian retreat center.

I began talking about spending time there with my family in the Summers. He said he had spent time there, too. We wondered if our paths had ever crossed. Then I began to tell of an unpleasant event when I was in high school.

I was in the jam-packed snack bar when a young Marine entered looking to pick a fight. When no one would oblige him, he went to leave and a young fellow coming into the snack bar accidentally bumped into him. With that the Marine slugged the fellow several times.

When the poor fellow managed to get away from his assailant, he left. I followed him out the building and across to a water fountain beside the auditorium. When he stopped to splash some water on his bruised face I drew up beside him to ask if I could help him in any way. He said he was ok - but thanks.

As I was telling my painting buddy this story he said he had been the young victim of the Marine's violent attack. "And I remember a red-headed guy offering to help me. That was you?" [I used to have red hair.] He went on to say, "I want you to know how much your kindness meant to me after what had happened."

After the shock of this odd turn of events sank in, I said, "I have always regretted not stepping in to help you when that guy hit you." To which he replied, "If you had, you would have been beaten to a pulp. That Marine was well trained and looking for trouble. What you did for me that night meant more than you can know."

For me this was a living parable of the mustard seed. The tiniest act of kindness meant far more than I ever imagined. Never think your simple acts of kindness are meaningless.

3

The Bible is chocked full of stories where some very large things were accomplished using small and very ordinary things...such as ordinary household oil in the case of Elisha or a tiny mustard seed or a pinch of leaven in the parables we read this morning or a one-talent person in another of Jesus' parables. God has a way of quietly taking the common and ordinary and doing marvelous things with them. Have you noticed?

Perhaps you have not noticed God quietly at work in ordinary things because the spectacular impresses us more. We think it is worth noting when someone gives several million dollars to a university...not the many little gifts from faithful alumni and alumnae. The church that draws 5,000 people catches our attention...not the modest crowd that gathers each Sunday morning to sing doxologies. We think the wealthiest and biggest church must be the best and must please God the most. We think the girl with the prettiest face must be the most interesting person in the room...or the person with the loudest mouth must be the best leader.

But the God we discover in the Bible is forever picking out something insignificant and ordinary and making it important: a tiny mustard seed, a widow's mite, a lily, a sparrow, a pinch of salt, ordinary household oil. It is as if God was trying to train our eyes for seeing in a new way...for looking at things with a more discerning eye. It is as if God was saying that very often size and bigness are a delusion and a snare...and that smallness may well be loaded with infinite possibility.¹

It is as if God prefers to work not in the center of the world's stage but off at the edges where you'd least expect him. And wouldn't you know...it is precisely in such unlikely places that God accomplishes his greatest wonders.

God chooses an obscure nomadic tribe and promises them his care...and says that through them God intends to bless the whole world. Later God sends his Son, not into the center of things, but into a little known corner of the world. He was born not even in a decent bed but in a stable. He grew up like a peasant...died as a criminal...and finally was buried in a borrowed tomb. All of this should teach us to look beyond the glitter of the world to those out-of-the-way places where God is doing his greatest work.²

4

So far we have focused upon how God can take the small and ordinary and make it spectacular. Can I get you to shift gears and think about the parable in a different way?

As Jesus tells it, the parable is tied to hidden things – a seed so small you can hardly see it, a tiny pinch of leaven, a treasure in a field, a pearl of great value. It may well be Jesus wanted his hearers to focus upon the **hidden nature** of things.

Mustard plants were the kudzu of Jesus' day.³ The disciples would have been as surprised by Jesus saying the kingdom of heaven is like someone who planted a mustard seed as we would if he had said God's kingdom is like someone who planted kudzu. No one would intentionally plant either. But when the kingdom of heaven was likened to a mustard seed it may have been to warn us against becoming too comfortable with the expected and the predictable...because it may be through the unexpected and the unpredictable that God's work is done.

Jesus may have been warning us in the church about drawing rigid, concrete boundaries around the kingdom of God. He knew that we tend to want to have our faith figured out – all tied neatly in a bow – no room for questions – no room for doubts – nothing new to be learned. He knew how tempting it was and would be to try to narrowly define what it means to be Christian. We want neat rows of carefully tended doctrine and practice. No mustard plants. No kudzu. No mess.⁴

Then, just when we are least expecting it, God's voice whispers in our ear – pushing us beyond our boundaries, forcing us to ask whether the boundaries we have built have

more to do with **our** boundaries than with **God's**. In this sense, then, the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed – a simile meant to tell us God is forever invading our orderly sense of things...turning our righteous conclusions upside-down.⁵

Like the mustard seed, the kingdom of heaven invades the cultivated soil of our certainties and creates something new. Hidden within what we think we see so clearly, the seeds of God's kingdom grow up in unexpected ways until what we thought we knew is transformed by our surprising, invasive God.⁶

5

Two ways to look at the parable of the mustard seed. The first would have us see that God doesn't seem to accomplish his greatest wonders at the center stage or where brass bands are playing but off to the side where the world never sees anything worth noting. Unlikely as it seems...that may be where God's greatest miracles are being performed, through ordinary men and women, through modest gifts you and I put into the offering plate Sunday mornings, through our daily simple acts of kindness and goodness?⁷

And a second way of looking at the parable is to hear Jesus reminding us to be very careful lest our convictions, even what we take to be indispensable beliefs at the core of our faith...that these treasured convictions and beliefs may actually be barriers that keep us from letting God's mustard seed take root in us and grow?

And so we pray that God's will be done...and that he may give us the ability, the will, the humility, and the courage to see it. Amen.



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Endnotes:

¹ Klein, Wm. R. 1983. "God's Unspectacular Wonders," preached September 18 at 2nd Presbyterian Church, Roanoke, VA, 2-4. Citing Steimle, Edmund A. 1957. *Are You Looking For God?* Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 97.

² Klein, 4.

³ Kudzu vines grow as much as a foot per day during summer months, climbing trees, power poles, and anything else they contact. Under ideal conditions kudzu vines can grow sixty feet each year. Kudzu vines produce very few seeds. When the pods dry most of the seeds have withered away. Seeds that survive are tiny and very hard, which makes them surprisingly hard to germinate. Odd how comparable kudzu is to the mustard plant.

⁴ Bartlett, David L. & Taylor, Barbara Brown, ed. 2011. *Feasting on the Word*. Year A, Vol. 3. Louisville: WJK Press, 285, 287.

⁵ Bartlett, 287.

⁶ Bartlett, 289.

⁷ Klein, 9.