

July 23, 2023
Mustard Seed
Mark 4:30-32

He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?"³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth,³² yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

Please pray with me:

God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking. Amen.

Jesus never gave a straight answer about the kingdom of God. We can't point to it and say, "there it is!" but according to Jesus, it is among us and within us. He did use parables to describe it – parables that leave us scratching our heads and wanting for something a little more defined. "The kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in a field." (Matt 13:44) "The Kingdom of God is like a merchant in search of fine pearls." (Matthew 13:45) "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven." (Matthew 13:33) "The kingdom of God is like a farmer throwing seeds on the ground." (Mark 4:26) "The kingdom of God is like a net, used for fishing, thrown into the sea." (Matthew 13:47) "For the kingdom of God is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard." (Matthew 20:1)

Several of these parables, if you were to look them up, would be found in the Gospel of Matthew. And it can be a little confusing, because sometimes Matthew uses the language, "the kingdom of heaven." But Jesus isn't talking about heaven or any kind of afterlife. Kingdom of heaven and Kingdom of God are interchangeable terms. Scholars believe Matthew didn't want to put in writing the word for "God," because in Judaic usage the term "God" was not spoken, so he wrote kingdom of heaven instead to keep it from being inadvertently spoken.¹ Now that is a little aside, but important to know, if you want to start looking at some of these parables.

Each of these parables captures your imagination and leads you to yet another facet of the kingdom. We are to seek the kingdom above all else, Jesus says, near the end of the Sermon on the Mount. And his parables keep us reaching and seeking for a deeper and clearer understanding of the kingdom. No one parable or passage of scripture sums it all up or delivers it in a tidy package.

So today, as we focus on one of these parables, we already know that it is revealing one segment of a larger picture. Perhaps you remember the old gameshow "Concentration." The show featured contestants matching prizes, represented by spaces on a game board, which,

¹ New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Volume 3, page 513

when removed, would reveal portions of a [rebus](#) puzzle for the contestants to solve.² A rebus puzzle is a combination of letters, symbols, and illustrated pictures that communicate a message the contestant has to decipher to win. The objective was to solve the rebus puzzle as quickly as possible, with just a few segments revealed, but sometimes, the small segments of the revealed puzzle were very misleading, leading to wrong and sometimes hilarious guesses.

The kingdom of God is like that rebus puzzle, revealed in part by a multiplicity of parables.

One of these parables is the parable of the mustard seed. Yawn, yawn. We've heard this parable so many times we don't even have to think about it. Tiny seed, big results.

Determined not to preach that sermon, I tried to hear this parable with fresh ears.

"With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?" asks Jesus. You can almost see him stroking his beard, looking thoughtfully into the sky, as he runs through his mental library of parables. Let's see...its like a tiny, tiny, seed – a mustard seed – that you plant and over time it breaks open and grows to become a glorious **shrub**.

Imagine with me, raised eyebrows and curious looks as the people question, "A shrub?"

Jesus continues...Oh yes, it is the greatest of shrubs! It grows to maybe 4 or 5 feet. Birds can even nest in it...little birds.

Are you familiar with the word "underwhelmed?" Don't you feel like a shrub, even if it is the greatest of all shrubs, is a bit underwhelming? The kingdom of God is like a tiny seed that grows to be your average, ordinary, invasive, shrub/weed.

When you read this same parable from the Gospel of Luke, it makes you wonder if Luke was underwhelmed by Mark's version of this parable. This is how Luke tells the parable: ¹⁹It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches." (Luke 13:19)

A tree sounds so much more impressive. We want amazing results!

Matthew tells the same parable this way: "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." (Matthew 13:32).

Matthew and Luke seem to have a need for the result of a tiny seed sown to be spectacular, not the meager results of a shrub. And when we teach that the meaning of this parable is how something small has the potential to grow into something big and impressive, we perpetuate an

² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Concentration_\(game_show\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Concentration_(game_show))

expectation of big results, enormous success, and extraordinary outcomes. But what if Jesus was really saying the kingdom of God is like sewing a small seed and getting average results?

Perhaps it is intended as encouragement for people sewing small seeds of the kingdom with modest or meager outcomes. The one thing consistent in all three gospels is that the tiny seed becomes a place of life-giving refuge for birds.

The first fall I was in California, I was asked to preach at the Disciples on Campus worship service at Chapman. Cisa, the coordinator of the worship services heard me preach a decent sermon the week before and she said I should just preach it. But nooooooooooooo! I felt the need to go in a different direction, based on a little ad I saw in my Christian Century magazine.

The ad was for a conference called Blue Ridge Tales and I was surprised that I recognized the keynote speaker. The subtitle was: Stories of Survival, Healing, and Faith with the Reverend Becca Stevens. I went to seminary with Becca Stevens. I knew she had become an Episcopal Priest and worked with prostitutes in Nashville. What I didn't know I read in her bio in the ad. It said, *"The Reverend Becca Stevens is an author, priest and founder of Magdalene and Thistle Farms, a community and social enterprise for women recovering from prostitution, trafficking, addiction and life on the streets. Named one of 15 Champions of Change by the White House for her work in domestic abuse, she has been featured on NPR, PBS, CNN, The Huffington Post, Southern Living, Christian Century, and Victoria Magazines."*

Now I am about to confess something to you that I am not proud of. My first reaction was a sprinkling of jealousy quickly replaced by a flood of inadequacy. What have I ever done?

I went on to preach that night about being unremarkable, which I deftly proved with my sermon. I was met with wide eyes and blank stares from students, who, from birth, have been marketed to, and told, that they must be remarkable. No one aspires to be average.

Brené Brown, in her book "The Gifts of Imperfection," says, "In this world, an ordinary life has become synonymous with a meaningless life." According to Brown, the pressure to be extraordinary leads to a cycle of performing, perfecting, pleasing and proving which has dire consequences. She says, "We are the most obese, most in debt, most medicated and most addicted adults in human history. We're also the busiest. We take less vacation, we work longer hours, and we sleep less than anyone who came before us."

My question is, "why?"

It seems we are constantly hustling for our worth, which is too often defined by the size of our accomplishments. Yet, most of us will never be identified as heroes and most of our efforts will never be recognized as anything spectacular, if recognized at all.

Maybe the size of the results is not what this parable is about. Maybe the most important thing about this parable, whether the result is a shrub or a tree, is that places of refuge are created

for the birds...places where the vulnerable, the tired, the struggling can find a little shade and rest.

In addition to saying we should stop worrying about doing great things and do small things with great love, Mother Teresa also said, "We are not called to be successful, but faithful."

God has given us a mission to serve the needs of our neighbor, with whatever resources and influence we have. The size of our results is not the point – but our faithfulness is.

Our motives matter. Are we trying to build a name for ourselves, hustling for our worth, or are we striving with all that we are to live the kingdom way, knowing that we are enough? Are we creating places of refuge where people can rest, and heal, and be loved, and find new life? If even for a minute or a moment?

With the tiniest of seeds, we can serve our neighbor and grow the kingdom.

It's just one piece of the kingdom picture.