



Roanoke, Virginia

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“It is like a mustard seed...”

Part II of the Summer Sermon Series, “Hidden Treasure.”

Mark 4:26-32

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Continuing our sermon series on the parables of Jesus, we turn to the Gospel of Mark. Several times throughout the gospels, Jesus uses images that would have been familiar to his audience—images of seeds, sowers, birds of the air. The two parables we read in Mark come in a series the gospel-writer shares. The first is of a sower who scatters seed and then heads to bed—it’s not found in the other three gospels. The second is the parable of the mustard seed that, when planted, grows and grows, and birds of the air rest in its shade. This parable is also found in Matthew and Luke, but with some editorial differences.

Mark 4:26-32

²⁶ He also said, ‘The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.’

³⁰ He also said, ‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³²yet 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.’



Sermon:

The word “parable” comes from two Greek words: *para*—as in parallel—means to put something side by side; *balo* means to cast or to throw. Thus, a parable casts two images side by side.ⁱ Think of something as simple as parallel lines. The two will never meet. Likewise, the parables and that which we put alongside them may never meet either, but there is a constant alignment that forces us to go back and forth between the two. When we look at what happens in the story and what happens in our own lives, we go back and forth between the two. And this back and forth—this cyclical comparison—causes us to begin to see new things.

A parable asks us to think about very important matters: our relationships with others, our place in the world, how we can be better people. A parable can challenge us to see that there is more to life than we had imagined. And if these two, the story and our real life never fully cross on their parallel journey, there may be no end to what we see.

In this way, a parable does not always have a clear meaning. No wonder the disciples found this pattern of Jesus’ speech rather unsettling. And, no wonder, Jesus told parables. After all, his entry into the world was meant to be unsettling.

Human nature has not changed all that much in 2,000 years, and like the Pharisees and disciples, we would prefer a clearer answer. We want an explanation from Jesus, but he gives us instead, a story. Jesus tells these stories not for explanation, but for exploration.ⁱⁱ He asks that we engage our imaginations; instead of looking for certainties, he hopes to unlock discoveries about the ways God works in the world, and the ways we are called to live and serve in it.

This past week, a dear friend from childhood posted a photo of her darling 8-year-old daughter. At their church’s Vacation Bible School, her daughter asked Jesus into her heart, prayed what her tradition calls “the sinner’s prayer,” and is ready to be baptized. My friend’s comment went on to read, “This is the most important decision our daughter will make in her life.”

Now that is a beautiful and meaningful moment for that sweet child and her family. But my experience of faith is nothing quite that simple. I do not see where Jesus asks us to input an equation in order to get out a result—do these steps, say this prayer, faith will come, and it’s smooth sailing ‘til glory. I ought to tread lightly because I do not mean to belittle my friend’s experience or the immense pride they have in their daughter’s love for her Savior—that is exemplary. But if I hold that Facebook snapshot next to my own wrestling with faith, a faith that starts and rests on a foundation like that would not survive. Or a faith that rests on my own choice, for that matter, would not survive.

Perhaps it would be easier if the life of faith were that simple and clear—it is what we see the disciples asking for all the time. And perhaps when you are young and healthy and the world is your oyster, that kind of foundation will hold for quite a while. If you are lucky, maybe even a lifetime. But when the uncertainty, pain, and struggle of real life in this world come crashing in, I am not certain simple answers will hold. On this journey of faith, I had rather have a Jesus who does not create equations you can either solve and get right or fail and... who knows what. As



complicated as it sounds, I would rather have a Jesus who walks alongside me, accepts my wrestling and my doubt, and invites me to imagine and discover something more.

For instance, a simple understanding of the parable of the mustard seed could be to take it as allegory: just like the mustard seed starts small and grows, so might your faith if you tend it. Or a simple understanding of the parable as a fable: sometimes very large things have small beginnings, so even if you exercise your faith in small ways, God will use it to do great things. Now, there is nothing technically *wrong* with these interpretations. They indeed teach, instruct, enlighten. But the problem with such simple understandings, however, is that it tames the parables and makes them something... safe—and parables are not meant to be safe, but unsettling and subversive.

So, let's look at our parables again.

Let's go back to the sleeping gardener. If you are a perfectionist, workaholic, or compulsive worrier—if you insist on being in control, if you believe in work before play, or if you practice vigilance in all things—then you already know what is wrong with this first parable. *Good* gardeners do not toss a bunch of seeds into their backyards and then snooze away the growing season. They plan and prod and hover. They make neat little rows in well-manicured beds. They keep a wary eye on the weather. They protect their gardens from birds, rabbits, and deer. My goodness, our backyard smells like a laundry from the countless bars of Irish Spring soap hanging from every tomato cage to keep the deer at bay. From early spring until harvest, good gardeners water, they fertilize, they prune, they weed, and they *worry*.ⁱⁱⁱ

But the gardener in Jesus' parable scatters and *sleeps*. He does not plan, or slog away, or worry, or second-guess. He enjoys the deep sleep of a baby. In this story of the kingdom, it is not our striving, our piety, or our doctrinal purity that causes us to grow and thrive in God's garden. It is God's grace alone.

According to this parable, the kingdom of God is both fruitful and hidden. It works its fertile magic underground. Eventually it brings forth all kinds of abundance, but the process is hidden from our eyes.

In the next parable, a sower sows a mustard seed in the ground. The joke here is that people in Jesus' day did not plant mustard seeds. While some varieties were used as spice and others medicinally, in general mustard was considered at the very least pesky and often somewhat dangerous. Wild mustard was a weed—a noxious, stubborn weed. Once it takes root, it can overtake a whole planting area. That is why mustard would only occasionally be found in a garden in the ancient world. It was much more likely you would see it overtaking the side of an open hill or abandoned field. Imagine a gardener today planting kudzu or dandelions. These are commonplace nuisances we try to get rid of, not cultivate on purpose.

And mustard is not an attractive plant. It grows like a weed, and it looks like one.

And the birds... I love birds, and it is a beautiful image to imagine birds finding shade in the branches. But are birds what gardeners are trying to attract? Birds *eat* seeds and fruits. They can wreak havoc in a cornfield. Birds are literally why scarecrows exist.



So what is Jesus trying to tell us with these stories? What does it mean to take an invasive, unattractive weed and use it as an image for God's kingdom? What does it tell us about who counts in God's economy? Who matters? What is beautiful? What we see that is sacred?

As John Dominic Crossan puts it:

The point, in other words, is not just that the mustard plant starts as a proverbially small seed and grows into a shrub of three or four feet, or even higher, it is that it tends to take over where it is not wanted, that it tends to get out of control, and that it tends to attract birds within cultivated areas where they are not particularly desired. And that, said Jesus, was what the Kingdom was like: not like the mighty cedar of Lebanon and not quite like a common weed, [more] like a pungent shrub with dangerous takeover properties. Something you would want in only small and carefully controlled doses—if you could control it.^{iv}

I remember when I was in middle school, a girl in my gym class had a short silver necklace with a hollow glass bead pendant. Inside of that bead was a single mustard seed. I wanted that necklace—I thought it was such a cool way to wear a Christian symbol without it being overtly Christian. I also thought I knew what a mustard seed symbolized. But holding up this story of Jesus alongside my life yet again, all these years later, in the back and forth, I see something more. I know that back then I did not appreciate the subversive symbol this tiny seed indeed represents.

Jesus told stories. And years, decades since first hearing these stories, I am still discovering new things. I am glad for that. Jesus did not give simple answers. He gave us parables. He asked us to use our minds—not just our minds, our imaginations—and gave us the key to see God's kingdom in new and dynamic ways. What I understood at age 8 and 12, at 28 and 32, are not what I see at 36. And what I see at 36 will not be what I see at 96, Lord willing. Our faith is not a one-time decision, but a lifelong journey of ups and downs, of faith and doubt. We read about, worship, and serve a God who walks right alongside us on the way, offering a story, one after another—and another—and another.

The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground...

It is like a mustard seed...

It is like a treasure hidden in a field...

...a merchant...

...a net...

He doesn't tell us about the kingdom just once, but continually. He doesn't use one illustration, but countless illustrations. He allows us the space to explore and look at the parable from different angles over the course of our whole life long.

What I see now that I did not see before is that the kingdom of God is something we cannot control. And it is definitely *not* safe or tame—not if we are satisfied with the way things are. Instead, the kingdom of God comes to overturn, to take over, and to transform the kingdoms of this world.



Of course, this is a warning to those of us who benefit from and are satisfied with the way the world is. Who wants a new kingdom if you have it pretty good in the present one? But to those who are left out and left behind, or who believe the world could and should be better, Jesus' parable is a promise. And that promise brings hope.

There is a scene from the film *The Hunger Games* that was not in the book but gets at this idea so perfectly. President Snow, the totalitarian ruler of Panem, asks his chief Games-maker why they must have a winner of the Hunger Games. The answer? Snow says, "Hope." He wants to give the oppressed people of Panem hope that maybe, just maybe, the odds will be in their favor and they may win the Hunger Games and escape their life of oppression. "Hope," he explains, "is the only thing more powerful than fear." But too much hope is a dangerous thing. "A little hope is effective," he explains, "a lot of hope is dangerous."

That is what Jesus offers. Jesus offers us a lot of the dangerous hope that God's kingdom is coming. And though we cannot control it or even summon it, we can look for it and even aid in its unexpected growth.^v

The kingdom Jesus describes, for all its miraculous extension, remains lowly (It is like a mustard seed...). Jesus kept company, walked and taught and healed with common people. He used common, ordinary, everyday characters and objects in unexpected ways to describe God's kingdom. If we follow Jesus' explorations, the kingdom of heaven is found in what we today would call "our own backyard."^{vi}

So where do you see God's kingdom infiltrating the world today? Where do you see God creating hope? Where do you see God at work, not necessarily in some grand mountaintop moment where life is good and faith feels easy—but in the daily living of your ordinary life? The Jesus I come to know in the gospels is walking right alongside us. He's not feeding us easy answers but inviting us in to encounter his word again and again and again. In our exploration, we can see it, we can feel it, that something more—that's God's kingdom breaking in.

ⁱ Amy-Jill Levin and Sandy Eisenberg Sasso. *The Marvelous Mustard Seed* (Flyaway Books: Louisville, 2018).

ⁱⁱ Karoline Lewis. "A Life in Parables," *Dear Working Preacher*, www.workingpreacher.org, 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ Debie Thomas. "Meanwhile, the Kingdom," www.journeywithjesus.net, June 10, 2018.

^{iv} John Dominic Crossan. *The Historical Jesus*, (New York: Harper One, 1993), 278-279.

^v David Lose. "Mission Possible," *Dear Working Preacher*, www.workingpreacher.org, June 10, 2012.

^{vi} Amy-Jill Levine. *Short Stories By Jesus*, (New York: Harper One, 2014), 167.

