

Week 19  
January 25, 2009

## How 'Bout Some Mustard On That?

### The Kingdom Parables of Jesus

*Matthew 13:31-32*

For the last two weeks, we've seen Jesus compare the kingdom of God to a seed. In the Parable of the Seed and Sower, the seed is "the message about the kingdom" sown in fields that are more or less fertile. In the Parable of the Good Seed and the Bad Seed, Jesus calls the seed "the sons of the kingdom," as if each person of faith is a burgeoning seedling growing alongside the faithless.

This week, we come to the Parable of the Mustard Seed. It is a short parable about a small object. The first thing we note about mustard is that it has very small seeds. Whether we're talking about black, brown, white or yellow mustard, the seed is small. The second thing worthy of note is that mustard, in Jesus' time and region, was both herb and shrub; both seasoning and nuisance. In other words, if mustard was nurtured and harvested intentionally, it was a wonderful herb and seasoning. But because mustard can grow liberally and freely without much intentionality, it can also be a fast-spreading shrub and most people would call it a nuisance. In fact, it was regulated against in some places and times, because if people had mustard in their private gardens, then the potential for unwanted spread of mustard plants could cause problems for others.

With the right freedom or care, the mustard seed can grow from shrub to tree, standing as high as ten feet tall, with limbs that reach out high enough and wide enough for birds to take refuge.

Jesus tells the story of a man who planted mustard seeds in his field. Who is the man? He is the landowner. In the two previous parables, the landowner is Jesus himself, with the possibility that we could say God in general. What is the field? It is the world; God's world.

What, says Jesus, is the outcome? The seed grows. While the seed itself is tiny, the seedling grows into a bush that even becomes a tree – the largest in the garden. And it gives refuge for the birds to nest in its branches and, as Mark's gospel puts it, in its shade.

What is the meaning of this parable? We're left to fend for ourselves. While Jesus explains other parables, this one he lets his disciples unravel and apply. That's probably fine, since it doesn't seem to be a complex parable with any secret messages or confusing implications. Nonetheless, it worth out time to consider what Jesus is likely saying.

First, the tiny mustard seed is like the message about the kingdom of God. It is, in a sense, our little message with huge potentials. It does us good to remember that this is our little message, our simple gospel, our children's story. Whenever the truth about Jesus is made too sophisticated, it tends to lose its power to engage and transform lives. We are a John 3:16 people, with a simple message. Jesus came to save. Jesus came to live. Jesus came to die. Jesus came to live again. Jesus lives to save. Not to condemn, but to save. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1 about how this looks like foolishness to others, but to us it is the power of God. To wise man, philosopher and scholar, this looks like silliness, but to us this little gospel saves us. We preach Christ crucified, simple as that; one died for all. Others will call us foolish and weak and even despised. We call this the wisdom of God and accept our lowly place in the esteem of others. For God has chosen the foolish and the lowly to humble the wise. So the best of our message, writes Paul, is not eloquence or the persuasive words of the wisdom of this age. No, our best message is something a child to say as well as me. *Jesus loves me, this I know; for the Bible tells me so; little ones to him belong; they are weak, but he is strong; yes, Jesus loves me...*

In a culture where education is king, and where the ratio of college graduates, and even the number of people with graduate degrees, is unlike most other places in the world, we need this reminder. Whenever we are tempted to make the gospel too sophisticated, we run several risks. First, we run the risk of mirroring our own growth in the viney complexities of conjecture and criticism. Jesus teaches us to have the faith of children, and while we're told time and again to "grow up" in every way, much of our sophistication is really more like putting on grown up clothes and play acting. We pretend to know what we don't and we put on authority that we don't really have. Honestly, our language of scholarship and sophistication sounds painfully self-congratulatory; and on behalf of others, it is woefully exclusive. And I don't just mean toward less-educated or less-agile minds.

I will forever be informed and inspired toward simplicity by several meaningful interactions. One example: I remember sharing the gospel of Christmas with the center on my university basketball team. Though he was a 4.0 student in biology and a very social person (hardly a recluse), he had never before heard the truth that Christmas was the celebration of the birthday of Jesus.

So when I say that we need to learn simplicity in our faith and in our language, I mean that we need to learn generosity and connectivity. Though I'm using a few big words right now, I'm trying to connect with people who are in the habit of talking over and around their neighbors, and don't even realize how lofty and unapproachable their faith appears to be. We also are blind to our pride and to our fear that those who are wise in the world will look down on our simple faith with scorn. Jesus said, "Bring it on." Paul said, "Bring it on." Can I say the same?

Oh, let's all grow deep. But in the depths, we will find a new kind of simplicity and childlikeness, the same way the best novelists prove that few and smaller words almost always say it better. As G.K. Chesterton has written, "...we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we."

Yes, the seed needs to grow. And we need to grow up. Ephesians 4:15 calls us to "grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ." The context suggests that if we grow, we'll no longer be subject to every wind of teaching and the cunning of crafty people. Peter tells us to crave spiritual food the way newborn babies crave milk, so that we can grow up in our salvation and get a fuller taste of the Lord's goodness (1 Peter 2:2). Peter also ends his second letter with his admonition to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." The Bible isn't against education or growth, and I'm not against either. Though I stand with scripture against a certain kind of knowledge that "puffs up", instead of love that "builds up." (1 Corinthians 8:1)

Since people have been growing in grace and knowledge and love for 2,000 years, this little mustard plant has now become the biggest plant in the garden. More people call Christ their Lord and Christianity their faith than any other faith in the world. And there are more Christians today, and even a higher percentage of Christians today, than at any other time in Earth's history. While we fear that we might be watching Christianity lose its standing and influence in "post-Christian" U.S. and Europe, people are coming to Christ by the millions in South America, Asia and Africa. We do well to remember that like a mustard plant, this message of the kingdom has an amazing capacity for reproducing and taking hold in a variety of fields; even in places that were once hostile to the Christian message.

Back to us. Psalm 1 speaks of the person who loves God's laws and meditates on them day and night. "He will be like a tree planted by streams of water." The two characteristics of that "tree" are these: fruitfulness and sustainability. Over and over, Jesus warns against religion that bears bad fruit or no fruit. He curses a fig tree that bears no fruit, and he chastises the religious leaders who bore bad fruit or new fruit from their approach to religion. It's so important for us to ask, "Am I bearing fruit?" and then to make whatever adjustments might be born out of any answer that is somewhat indicting. What are the fruits? First, there are the Fruits of the Spirit,

“which are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” Second, there is the fruit of good influence: people around me are left better by the association. If we find these qualities wanting in our lives, or even fading out of our lives, then we have some hard questions to reckon with. Am I attached to the vine (Jesus)? Are there thorny plants or rocky patches in the soil of my heart that are causing my faith not to thrive? Are there bitterness issues, or forgiveness matters, or sin problems, or habits and customs that are preventing me from being who God wants me to be? Is there something new that God wants to do to help me break free and break out with a whole new harvest of fruitfulness?

Just as God wants to seed the earth with the message about the kingdom, so God wants to season the earth with salty and spicy Christians. We think differently and love less carefully. We serve more generously and give more outrageously. Our words are seasoned with piercing truth and unsettling sympathies, and our lives are filled with hope. All of this leaves people wondering and questioning.

And sometimes, people despise us. Our differences are a gentle and subtle indictment. While we are careful not to judge others, as the Parable of the Good and Bad Seeds reminds us, we can't avoid the fact that living for Jesus is counterculture. To the degree that people love diversity, they will persecute us for our *sameness*. And to the degree that people love uniformity, they will persecute us for our *differentness*: for not falling in line with their compromises and conforming to their dysfunction. Like the mustard plant, we will be a bane to many, and the spread of the gospel will be a threat to anyone who fears submission to God and longs independence from God's influence. They will hate us and try to harm us. The scripture is consistent about our response to persecution – love them back.

But for those people, and certainly for others who are less resistant to God, we are forever a refuge. Like the mustard tree, we become a people and a place for the birds of the air to find a branch to rest on and some shade to rest in. Like a cool, quiet cathedral that offers sanctuary from a hot and roiling world, we are temples of the living God offering sanctuary to those who suffer. We become a place and people who extend the hope of healing and help and forgiveness and acceptance and community.

But what if I still feel more like a mustard seed than a tree and more like a tiny chapel than a cathedral? I remember reading, years ago, Tom Sine's book, *The Mustard Seed Conspiracy*. I don't remember it all, but I remember the premise. Great things happen when good-hearted, Christ-loving people conspire to do small things that altogether have big consequences.