



Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. AMEN!

Years ago, I came across a riddle and kept it in my sermon file. It is one that was asked to Stanford graduates a few years ago. And only 17% of them figured it out, yet 80% of kindergarteners knew the answer. So, here goes:

“What is stronger than God, more evil than the devil, poor people have it, rich people don’t need it and if you eat it, you’ll die.”
The answer is “NOTHING”.

Well, that was an introduction to riddles. And some feel that is what the word parable means to many today. Parables are stories that leave the listener with the responsibility of figuring out just what they mean. Jesus told more than 40 parables during his ministry, and he only explained a few of them to his disciples. So, just like our Nothing question, they can be difficult to answer, to figure out. We often times jokingly criticize the disciples for not understanding Jesus, but even they had a lot of figuring out to do. And Jesus took the answers with him when he ascended into heaven. So here we are 2000 years later, still pondering what Jesus must have meant when he told some of those stories, those great parables.

Many theologians think that we cannot comprehend the parables of Jesus until we see ourselves in the story. Think of a child seeing herself in the mirror for the first time. Giggling away as it is a delight and so we too should be delighted when we are represented in the story, and we finally get it. That is until we realize that we are the younger, prodigal son who ran away with his father’s fortune. Or we are the Levite who passed by the beaten man on the road to Jericho. If we can see ourselves in the parable it takes on a whole new meaning, a whole new understanding.

The second parable in our text for today is the one I want to talk about. Many of Jesus’ parables have to do with seeds and soil, planting, and harvesting. These are all things that were familiar to the disciples. This one tells us that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. Wonder what that riddle is here to tell us. The tiny mustard seed is sown in the ground, and it grows up to become a large shrub. The plant then puts forth large branches so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.

Now if you take the Bible literally, you may have trouble with this parable. Modern agronomy has shown that the mustard seed is not the smallest of all seeds. In fact, it is the orchid seed that is, it is as small as a speck of dust. So, was Jesus wrong? It was probably the smallest seed he knew of. Don't think there were many orchids in the middle eastern dessert.

I think that the point of the parable is not about being the smallest of all seeds, but that something so small can grow into something great. And something that became useful as well. Was Jesus maybe saying that a small baby that was born in a humble stable would grow up to become a Savior, and people would find comfort and security in him?

Or could Jesus have been saying that this Christian Church, which began with just a tiny gathering of 12 fearful disciples in a small, upper room in Jerusalem, would one day become a gathering of more than 2 billion people, who find their hope in Jesus?

Or could this parable mean that if we only have faith the size of a mustard seed, our faith will mature and grow, and it will be enough to bring us to eternal life. Is this parable really about faith, faith in the fact that Jesus died on the cross to take away our sins, offer us forgiveness and then ascend to heaven to give us the promise of eternal life.

These interpretations of this one parable show another characteristic of parables and that is that there may be more than one likely explanation. All of these scenarios may have been part of Jesus' thinking when he sat down and told his hearers that the Kingdom of God was like a mustard seed. We don't know for sure. We are left to figure it out for ourselves.

And with that liberty, I am going to propose another interpretation to the mustard seed parable that really resonates with me. Since today is Father's Day, I would like to suggest that the mustard seed is the child in our midst? You all know how much Jesus loved the little children, how he would take them on his knee and bless them, even though it upset his disciples. Could Jesus be using this parable to remind the fathers of every age that our children are our greatest resource and our greatest responsibility and that they are the Kingdom of Heaven?

Let's think about that for a few minutes. The mustard seeds are our children, and our purpose is to nurture them, encourage them, protect them, and guide them, until they grow up to become the greatest of all shrubs. I know that many of you have children, grandchildren, and some even great grandchildren so as you think about them, grant me the liberty to say they are the Kingdom of God right here on earth. Yes?

In the typical nuclear family of decades ago that we mostly grew up in, most dads started out with good intentions and then stuff happens. They have to work long hours to provide for the family. There is no time left to play catch with our kids or take them to the zoo. Then when they grow up a bit more, dads often times don't like their children's music so they buy them a Walkman or stereo with headphones so they can listen quietly without bothering them.

Dads have to spend time taking care of the lawn and the flowerbeds and even plant a new tree in the back yard on occasion. All this takes time away from the "shrub" that God has given them to care for.

I was blessed to have a father that I loved, respected, and honored very much. He was my best friend, super teacher, a confidant, a great sounding board, and everything a father should be to his

daughter. He left this earth and has been with Jesus for the last 13 years. And I do still miss him every day. Some kids are not so lucky to have a great father and some of you might not be biologically a father. But remember, fathers come in all shapes, sizes, and circumstances. They don't need to be biologically your dad to participate in someone's life as a father.

Do any of you know who Harmon Killebrew was? He played major league baseball for 22 years, mostly with the Twins. Yes, he was never a Milwaukee Brewer or a Brave, but was still a great baseball player. He was 2nd only to Babe Ruth in power hitting with a killer swing. He tells this story about his youth. He and his brother were playing football with their dad in their yard and his mom yelled out the window, "you're tearing up the grass!" Killebrew's father shot back "We are not raising grass; we are raising boys!" So, is this mustard seed parable to serve as a timeless reminder to fathers about their shrubs? Maybe our assumption about the seed representing our children has some merit?

If surveyed, I think that most dads would agree about these few things:

1. That the best way to love their children is to love and respect their mother.
2. That the best gift they can give their children is a sense of safety and security as they grow up.
3. It is more important to give their children their time not their money.

I believe that most fathers or father figures here could keep this list going on and on. More important to be respected as a father than to be liked, more important to encourage them in their interests than to require them to share your interests. Sadly, I am not quite sure our society has that right today?

And this all does not only apply to dads, but to mothers, aunts, uncles, teachers, grandparents, and others in a child's life. I for one think that it takes a village to raise a child. Have you ever heard that old African proverb. Different people interacting in order for children to experience and grow in a safe environment was the premise for that statement.

I think Jesus would concur. Our responsibility goes far beyond our own children. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "The true test of a society is how it cares for its children." This means not just watching over and caring for our own kids, but it continues to include all children.

I believe that we do have a sense of that feeling here at Christ the Servant. We participate in our local food pantry and several of our members work with our backpack for kids program to help those children who are food insecure over the weekends with a meal or two. I think we also do a good job of caring for the children in our church. We have volunteers that sit and sometimes contribute to confirmation classes, who are not their parents. Margaret and others who share the responsibility of helping during Sunday school are a true blessing to the children. More than just a few of our members are involved in Sleep in Heavenly Peace, where they make and deliver beds for children in our area that do not have a bed of their own to sleep in. And I am sure that many of you either pray for these ministries and the kids they serve or support them financially.

God gave Rodney and me two wonderful children and for the most part they have grown into good shrubs. Now another generation is here. I pray every day that Emmett, our grandson will know how lucky he is to have such wonderful parents. And I pray for Frank and Tim to be the best dads they can be.

But this sermon is not some parenting report card. It is rather a reminder that parenting is never really done. Quite evident in our home since our 37-year-old daughter moved back in. Our children are not just the ones that we nurtured during their childhood. They all are our mustard seeds and will be the leaders of the world in no time. God has called us to water, fertilize and till them so they will grow to continue His Kingdom on earth. All these shrubs need to grow to know the truth that God is the only good, perfect Father. God is the only Father that can give us the keys to His Kingdom. The keys of love, forgiveness, and everlasting life. AMEN and Happy Father's Day