

What's the Big Deal about Mustard Seeds?

Mark 4:26-34

Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 13, 2021

Gospel Lesson, Mark 4:26-34

²⁶ He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹ As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

³⁰ Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. ³² Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”

³³ With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. ³⁴ He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

Sermon, “What's the Big Deal about Mustard Seeds?”

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I was raised in Milwaukee and by the time I was fourteen I was old enough to go to the mall all by myself. I had a paper route, which meant that I had a steady source of income. So early one May I made the mile-long walk to Capitol Court to buy a Mother's Day gift.

I thought my best bet would be Gimbel's Department Store and soon found myself at the costume jewelry counter. On top the counter there was a revolving rack that said “Monet.” The rack was filled with little cards, each bearing a charm. They were all within my price range and I found a little gold charm with a glass bubble in the middle. And in the bubble was a little roundish speck. The card indicated it was a mustard seed.

Perfect.

I purchased the charm, found a card at the Hallmark store, and was all set for Mothers' Day.

Why would Monet encase a mustard seed in a charm? It seems like such an insignificant memento to put in a charm. There's no question that the mustard seed was less valuable than the cheap gold surrounding it.

And it seems like such a random thing to do. Why not an apple seed or a zucchini seed or a kernel of corn? Those things would be far more appetizing and feed far more people than a

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mustard plant. And mustard is nothing but a condiment, a spice! What's the big deal about a mustard seed?

The answer, I believe, is found in today's gospel lesson from Mark 4 where Jesus declares...

³⁰ ...the kingdom of God is ...like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. ³² Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade."

This is one of those places where those who want to argue against the inerrancy of scriptures have a heyday. We must realize that the scriptures were not intended to be inerrant; the scriptures were intended to be authoritative.

In this passage, Jesus says that the mustard seed is "the smallest of all seeds on earth." There are smaller seeds, orchid seeds for example. Secondly, Jesus says that the mustard plant grows to become the largest of all garden plants. A mustard plant grows to about three feet tall. It wouldn't be that hard to find a taller plant and "refute" that claim, especially with today's hybrids.

But here's the thing: Jesus wasn't speaking as a botanist or a scientist; he was speaking as a teacher; he was speaking as one who had authority. And this was probably an illustration of convenience. This parable comes after Jesus has been teaching the crowds; now he's sharing with the disciples.

I imagine Jesus and his disciples walking past a mustard plant: Ah! An instant illustration! I envision Jesus walking over to the mustard plant and pulling some seeds from it to illustrate his point. And then I imagine him calling attention to a sparrow nestled in the branches of the mustard plant.

And that, Jesus says, is what the kingdom of God is like.

And the disciples all respond, "**What is he talking about?**"

I wanted to know what he was talking about, so I reached for a couple of commentaries and they all said the same thing in one way or another: they all said that the point of this parable is that *small is great*.

Small is great? I think that misses the point of the parable.

We in our Western culture are obsessed with size, whether it's the size of our portion, our corporation, our house, our earnings statement, or our attendance report to the Conference at the end of the year. We're obsessed with size. If the point of this parable is to say *small is great*, all we're really doing is providing comfort to whoever is reluctantly dieting, working for a smaller corporation, lives in a smaller house, has lower earning on their earnings statement, or pastors a smaller church.

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I don't think Jesus intended to make a statement about *size*—big or small. Such an intent would commodify the mustard seed and by extension, the kingdom of God. And the kingdom of God is not about commodification.

So what was Jesus saying? How is the kingdom of God like a mustard seed? If you look closely at a mustard seed, it will appear to be an inanimate object, incapable of doing anything at all.

But locked in that mustard seed is something incredibly special, for locked in that mustard seed is the potential for *life*. And when that potential for life hits the ground and is watered, guess what happens: **it sprouts. It grows.**

But there's more. And I hope I'm not pushing the parable too far, but as the children of God, we have been born of "water and the Spirit." We have become part of the kingdom of God. We are mustard seeds and we have been called to hit the ground where we might be planted and grow. And as we hit the ground, we touch the lives of others who, like Adam before us, have been formed out of the soil of the earth.

And as the children of God who have been born of water and the Spirit, we have been called to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. In other words, we have been called to pour the waters of God's grace upon those we encounter when we hit the ground. And growth happens.

At the risk of mixing metaphors, as the kingdom of God grows—as we grow in the grace of God—we provide shelter to the birds of the air. And of course, the birds of the air are the nations of the world—Jews as well as Gentiles.

There is a cooperative dimension to the kingdom of God. We see that in the other parable from today's gospel lesson.

"This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹ As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."

All we do is scatter the seed and water it, but we leave the growth up to God. We cannot save anyone; we can only plant the seed, water it, and ultimately harvest what the seed produces. But God does the rest thanks to a natural growth processes which God established as part of the Creation. For when God created the world and all that is therein, God also created the processes by which life is replicated and sustained. God causes the stalk to sprout. God causes the stalk to grow into full fruition. We're just there to enjoy the harvest. But it all begins with a seed—a seemingly lifeless seed. But within that seed there is the potential for life.

My friends, a mustard seed is not intended to be locked in a glass bubble. Nor is the kingdom of God to be locked in a glass bubble.

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Nora Jones writes that we as Christians have been called to be fishers of men and women and children. But in recent years, rather than fishing for souls, far too many churches and church leaders have become keepers of the aquarium. If we truly are the kingdom of God—if we truly are mustard seeds—then we need to get out of our glass bubbles and hit the ground where we might grow and produce more mustard seeds and provide shelter for the birds of the air—all to the glory of God.