

“Like a Grain of Mustard Seed”

Matthew 13:31-32

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The parables of Jesus are colorful word pictures meant to capture our imagination. He knew that if we couldn't imagine the Kingdom of Heaven we surely wouldn't know how to go about building that Kingdom. And building the Kingdom is how churches, historically, have understood their ministry.

When we started imagining a new building for this location back in 2008, we started producing floor plans showing rooms with natural light, an elevator, and warm, generous spaces. Those early floor plans helped us all to imagine a building free of barriers, open to all people regardless of physical ability. The floor plan was a little bit like a parable. It helped us imagine.

As Jesus began to imagine the Kingdom of Heaven, that is, life lived on earth as God hopes it will be lived; he lifted up a mustard seed, the smallest seed known at that time. He got everybody's attention and asked the disciples to imagine how building the Kingdom of Heaven begins with the tiniest amount of faith, the tiniest amount of kindness, the tiniest amount of love. It starts small and grows and multiplies and effervesces and expands until everyone everywhere is living their lives according to God's wildest hope.

That wildest hope of God is described in detail right in the same parable: the mustard seed grows into an enormous tree that serves as a refuge, a safe home for all kinds of birds. In the Kingdom of Heaven, there is room for the wrens and the ravens and the robins and the jays and finches and the hawks. I take that to mean that in the Kingdom of Heaven there's room for all kinds of people:

Spanish-speaking, Polish-speaking, English-speaking, Chichewa-speaking, Ukrainian-speaking; you get the idea.

The Kingdom of Heaven begins with the tiniest expression of love, the size of a mustard seed. The end result is a place called home for every creature who lives on the face of the earth. In the Kingdom of Heaven, there are no more homeless people. There are no more abandoned pets. There are no more children sold into slavery. Everyone has a home.

So, this is a timely text for America as we debate in the Congress and in the coffee shops whether our mustard tree is large enough to accommodate all the birds who long to land in our branches, to build their nests as we have built ours. It is a timely text for Israel and Palestine, for Russia and the Ukraine, for South Sudan and its neighbors.

As I was working on this sermon, a mustard seed arrived in the mail from South Burlington, Vermont. It was accompanied by a note to the South Church family. It reads: “Hello Friends! Just wanted to share a blessing I recently received with my dear friends at South Church. Your generosity and friendship helped me in a time of need, both spiritually and financially, and I would like to return the favor. Please use this \$100 as you see fit.” The note and the check are signed, Melissa Dickinson. And on the memo line, she has written: ‘paying it forward.’ You may or may not remember Melissa. She landed here in our mustard tree and built her nest here. She found a spiritual home here. Thrived here. There was room for her here. Her gratitude is thick. She expresses that gratitude with a gift of hundred dollars. I think of those one hundred dollars as one hundred mustard seeds. She asks us to use the money to plant another mustard tree, to keep on building the Kingdom of Heaven. This is how the Kingdom is built, one person at a time, one family at a time, one nest at a time. And it all begins with a simple, nearly imperceptible act of kindness.

The very act of sowing a seed is an act of faith. Anyone who farms or gardens knows this. Let's face it; it's a mystery how this all works. You plow up the land, punch little holes in the soil, plop a few kernels of corn into each hole, cover it with dirt, pat it down, hope the rain falls, pull a few weeds, and in a few weeks there is a plant pushing up out of the ground! And in a few months we are eating sweet corn! How does that happen?! Perhaps there's a PhD soil scientist here or an agronomist who can explain all this? On the other hand, I'm okay just living with the mystery of it all.

The way the Kingdom of Heaven is built is also a mystery! And I don't need to understand intellectually how it all works. I can live with the mystery of it all. I just know that one tiny act of faith brings an abundance of life. One tiny act of kindness leads to an abundance of life. One expression of love leads to an abundance of life.

I am reading a book right now called "This Is Paradise." It is a mother's story. Her son, Billy, had an urge to travel around the world, to explore the planet. He would send post cards and letters from various remote areas. But it was the postcard from Cape Maclear, Malawi that she remembered most. It said in his handwriting, "This is Paradise!" Shortly after sending the card, Billy had a massive heart attack and drowned while swimming in Lake Malawi. After the burial and the funeral back in Ireland, this mother needed to travel to Cape Maclear to see this Paradise her son had discovered. When she got there, she saw that there was no school for the children. So she set out to build one. But as the plans were coming together with the local families imagining it, a village child fell from a tree and broke his arm badly. And this mom saw that there was no medical clinic within twenty miles.

So, Billy's mother changed her plan. Without any logical reason to think it was possible to build a clinic and staff it with qualified medical personnel, and provide medicines; this broken-hearted mother planted a mustard seed. She asked her friends back home to chip in some money, whatever they could. That was fifteen years ago.

Today, all the villagers from near and far trek to the Billy Riordan Clinic for emergency and regular medical treatment. Doctors and medical students staff the clinic twenty four hours a day. When a small group from South Church goes to Malawi next April, we'll be stopping at Billy's Paradise, maybe delivering some antibiotics and bandages and splints for broken arms. But mostly, we'll be observing the evidence of the Parable of the Mustard Seed, what becomes possible when even one person initiates an act of kindness. This was not a project of a foreign government, nor of a church denomination. It was the planting of a mustard seed by one loving mother.

This is how the Kingdom of Heaven is built. I confess it is a mystery to me, how it all happens. I don't need to understand it intellectually. I just rejoice whenever I see it happening. May this ancient parable of the Kingdom be food for our ministry and mission at South Church. The truth of the mustard seed is one of the reasons I remain in the greatest of hope. Amen.