

The Parable of the Mustard Seed Revisited

Luke 13:18-19

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The Parable of the Mustard Seed is told in response to the question: “What is the Kingdom of God like?” I have always understood this question to mean: ‘what does life look like when it is lived as God hopes it will be lived?’ Jesus uses this parable to offer a glimpse of God’s wildest hope for humanity.

The mustard seed was considered the smallest of all the seeds known to humankind at that time. This implies that the Kingdom of God begins with modest expectation. Like the building of a house that begins with a single nail binding two pieces of lumber together, the Kingdom starts with a single act of love that binds two people together: two neighbors: one White, one Black; one Christian, one Jew; one European, one Asian; one northerner, one southerner; one male, one female. Wherever any two people choose to love and respect each other, that is where the Kingdom of God has its rudimentary beginnings. That is the mustard seed.

I always try to be present when the caravan of vehicles carrying youth or adult mission trippers arrives back in the church parking lot. I want to be among the first to hear the stories. And, inevitably, the first stories to be told are the ones where somebody met and came to respect an elderly blind man who hadn’t left his home for years, or met a child whose only toy was a jump rope made from a grape vine, or met a woman whose mental illness left her living in a cardboard box in an alley somewhere in the Bronx. I hear these stories and I see in the eyes of the storytellers the evidence that something deeply spiritual has taken root.

It's these Mustard Seed stories, these stories of one South Church person befriending one person from somewhere else in the universe that take us to the heart of Jesus' parable.

To what can the Kingdom of God be compared? The Kingdom of God can be compared to the joy that's born when any two people meet and choose to respect and even to love each other. The Kingdom of God is born in that simple setting. My older brother, Bob, was fond of reminding me that the longest journey begins with a single step. He thought of himself as the family philosopher. He loved that quotation from Lao-tzu the 5th century BC Chinese philosopher. It's a good insight into the Mustard Seed parable. The Kingdom of God commences with a single step. The Kingdom of God begins to take root and to grow and to expand and to send out new branches whenever two neighbors decide its time to take the first step; time to bury the hatchet; time to overcome prejudice; time to start building up the community. This is God's wildest hope for humanity.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed is forward-looking. Though the Kingdom begins with a tiny seed, it mushrooms into a full-blown tree whose branches are sufficient to host the nests of all the birds in the world. Thus, it can be said that the Kingdom of God has come and is still coming; has arrived and is still arriving; is real and is still becoming reality. There's a yeasty quality to the Kingdom. It anticipates a fullness that is yet to be, that God alone can see.

South Church has been a wonderful illustration of the Mustard Seed parable over many decades. In the early 1980's, one couple, Roger and Lois Richards, drew Rev. Steven's attention to the plight of their mentally ill son. As they discussed the church's ministry with persons living with a mental illness, a deep respect grew among them. They came to understand and love each other in a new way.

Then another couple, George and Bunny Clyde, took the risk and spoke up with the same concern within their family. Then a third couple, Ernie and Willie Lewis. The mustard seed was growing. The love was expanding. People who had suffered in silence were being heard and embraced. Today, that mustard seed is a full-grown tree. We know it as Inter-Community Mental Health. Sprouted in a basement room in our church, this ministry now serves thousands of clients and their families. This is how the Kingdom of God works. Two or three people come together, share a story, pray for a concern; and the love soon permeates the whole community. This is how God hopes life will be lived.

Several months ago, a certain preacher drew attention to the growing number of refugees fleeing from oppressive governments. Someone heard that concern, shared that concern. A mustard seed was planted. An idea for making love real was sown in the soil of faith. Then, a person who teaches English as a Second Language joined in. Then, someone who knows his way around local employment opportunities stepped up. Then someone with ties to rental units. Then someone with a passion for health care. Then someone who knows all about car seats. The mustard seed grew and grew. Some contributed cash; some furniture; some utensils; some food. Tomorrow night, a family of six, refugees from Syria will arrive to an open-arm welcome. This is a Mustard Seed story. It began with a simple idea of how to make love real. It caught on one person at a time. Tomorrow, another nest will be occupied in the mustard tree. The Kingdom of God is one step closer to the wildest hope of God.

In the Chichewa Language, there are two words for planting seeds: kulima and kufasa. Kulima means to plant each seed carefully, one at a time. Kufasa means to take a handful of seed and scatter it across the field. Depending on the crop, there is a time and a place for both.

When it comes to the mustard seed, my understanding is that kulima is the proper planting method, one intentional act of love at a time, one intentional bonding of one family with another, one neighbor with another, one church with another. I know we are officially known as the Congregational Church in South Glastonbury.

But it's exciting to think of ourselves as The Mustard Seed Church, the congregation that hears a cry for help and builds loving partnerships; the congregation with an eye toward the day when there will be a nest in the mustard tree for every kind of bird in God's creation.

On the front lawn of our church, there stands one of the most beautiful trees in our town. I doubt it is a mustard tree. Bob Shipman can tell us what it is. But I've come to see this gigantic tree as a symbol of today's parable. I hope you'll all check out this tree on your way home. Let the tree help us to imagine whose nest has yet to be found in its branches. In other words, what shall be our next step in building up the Kingdom of God? Questions like this keep us living in the greatest of hope. Amen.