

small is BIG
Matthew 13:31-32
Rev. Dan Schumacher

Do you ever think about, ponder on, wonder about the kingdom of heaven?

Brett Younger tells of when he was still a teenager, and his church was in the middle of the latest evangelism program. For several weeks they had been learning the material in these “big green workbooks.”

He recounts that “this particular method had three steps. In the introduction you moved from small talk to the church background of the target or person you’re visiting. This was followed by an eight-minute presentation on the gospel. The final step we learned was closing the deal.”

Now they were out knocking on doors and sharing what they’d memorized. Brett was partnered with an older man who’d been in church all his life. The address they’d been given was that of the sister of a church member. The woman’s husband had recently left her with two small children and so her sister – the one in church – thought she might be more open to the gospel than she had been in the past.

He says, “The woman was polite enough to do what most of us wouldn’t, she invited us in.” His partner commented on some photographs of her children, whom they could hear playing upstairs. They’d been warned not to mention “the husband.”

He was wondering how long the small talk should last when his partner suddenly cut the introduction short and asked what was called *the key question*, “Suppose you were to die tonight and stand before God and God were to say to you, ‘Why should I let you into heaven?’ What would you say?”

Younger says, “We’d been taught [in that big green workbook] that any answer that wasn’t *the answer* was wrong.” So his partner quickly launched into the presentation, which he’d learned well. He started with Romans 3:23, ‘For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.’ Then Romans 6:23, ‘The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ.’ Ephesians 2:10, ‘By grace are ye saved through faith, not of works, lest any man should boast.’ Romans 5:8, ‘God demonstrates his own love for us, in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.’ Then finally Romans 10:9-10, ‘If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead, you shall be saved; for with the heart man believes, resulting in salvation.’”

And, after this prodigious display of scripture memorization, he concluded by saying, “You’ve just heard the greatest story ever told about the greatest offer ever made. Do you want to receive this gift of eternal life that Christ left heaven and died on a cross to give you?”

Younger recalls that he was certain she was going to say, “Yes, this is wonderful. This is exactly what I needed to hear. I’m so glad you’ve come to offer me the keys to heaven.”

But she was silent for a moment and then she said, “As my sister probably told you, my husband recently left me. I’m not concerned about heaven right now. I’m concerned about how I’ll take care of my children. The hell I’m concerned with is right here. I’m living it right now. But thank you for your time.”

Younger says they made their way back to the car in silence. When they got in, he told his partner he’d done a great job and he thought she’d say “yes.”

He says, “But now I wonder if we got the story right.”

“What is the gospel?” he asks. “Most of the time Christians quote the apostle Paul — statements about justification by grace through faith and Christ being a substitutionary sacrifice for our sin. It sounds right, but then you have to wonder why Jesus didn’t talk about that stuff” (paraphrased from “The Gospel According to Jesus,” a sermon preached at Broadway Baptist Church, Fort Worth, Texas, September 10, 2006).

He’s right.

Jesus just didn’t talk like that. He didn’t use phrases like “justification by grace through faith” or words like “substitutionary” and “atonement.” I don’t know about you, but truth be told, the gospel Jesus preached isn’t the one I was taught growing up. Jesus didn’t preach about *getting* to heaven, so much as he preached about *being* heaven... or at least being *some small extension* of heaven here on earth.

He didn’t use words like omnipotent or omniscient or soteriology — words that you need a Ph.D. in theology to understand. Instead, Jesus spoke about the vast mysteries of God and God’s kingdom so that any first century farmer could get it.

Jesus said things like: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches” (Matthew 13:31-32).

I love this parable. It won’t surprise Bill Stephens to hear this, but I’d go so far as to say that it’s one of my favorite passages in all of scripture!

But I love parables, in general — and I think it’s because they tease my mind into active thought. I can’t read them without imagining them. And I can’t imagine them without wondering who or what I am in them — how I relate to them. Am I the prodigal son or the judgmental one? Am I the bridesmaid who won’t share her lamp oil? Am I rocky soil or fertile soil?

That is the wonderful power of parables. They don't tell us what to believe. Instead, They invite us to inhabit their story so that *we* might become the theologian in the room.

This is the difference between Jesus' parables, and, say, *Aesop's Fables*.

Rather we know it or not, we all know *Aesop's Fables*. And the thing about Aesop is he would tell a story, and then immediately tell you what he meant by the story.

Aesop said things like, "A man and his wife had the good fortune to own a goose that laid a golden egg everyday. Lucky though they were, they soon began to think that they were not getting rich fast enough. And imagining the bird must be made of gold on the inside, they decided to kill it in order to secure the whole store of precious metal at once. But when they cut it open they found it was just like any other goose. Thus they neither got rich all at once as they had hoped, nor enjoyed any longer the daily addition to their wealth."

And then — just to ensure you caught the moral of the story — Aesop tells you the point: "Much wants more and loses all."

But Jesus doesn't like telling you what his parables mean. He didn't even like telling his first disciples.

Jesus didn't like *explaining* the kingdom of heaven, because explaining the kingdom of heaven is like having to explain the punchline to a good joke. If it has to be explained to you, you've already missed the point.

So, unlike Aesop, Jesus said things like, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed..." and then he goes silent. He doesn't explain. He doesn't elaborate. He simply casts two images side by side and lets them rumble around in your brain — and he hopes that maybe they'll rumble around in your heart, too.

What do you imagine he means when he says "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed?"

Do you think he's talking about where we will go when we die? Or could he be talking about how he trusts that God is breaking into our world, into our lives, even now?

There is a lot to take in and consider as we let this particular parable rumble around in our thoughts and souls.

For instance, in the Old Testament, trees — especially the mighty cedars of Lebanon — served as imagery for God's rule or reign, and birds often symbolized God's oppressed people. We heard Hartsel read one such allusion just a few moments ago:

"The trees of the LORD are watered abundantly,
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.

In them the birds build their nests..." (Psalm 104:16-17).

Beyond Old Testament allusions, *mustard seeds* were well-known for their *small size* in the Jewish and Greco-Roman world. Though they are *not* the smallest seed, they are tiny – roughly 1 millimeter in diameter and so small that it takes about 750 seeds to equal 1 gram.

Most scholars believe the mustard seed to which Jesus was referring was black mustard, which germinates within five days and grows quickly to a height of about ten feet, and has large leaves at its base.

Birds would have been attracted to the mustard plant because of both its shade and its seed. They would have found within its branches both shelter and nourishment.

Pliny the Elder, the naturalist and natural philosopher who was a near contemporary of Jesus, viewed mustard as extremely beneficial to health, able to cure a long list of ailments.

But as interesting as all of that is, it might distract us from the image Jesus most wants us to catch. "It is the smallest of the seeds," he said, "but when it has grown it is the greatest of the shrubs and becomes a tree" (Matthew 13:32).

Think about it. A mustard seed is so small that it couldn't serve as a full meal for a finch, and yet it becomes something so great that birds nest in its shade.

How can something so small, so unlikely, be something so potent?

It was a several years ago now, and I was in charge of Bible story time for Vacation Bible School. One day, this parable was our lesson. It was about *growing with God* and how from something as small as a mustard seed could grow a tree big enough for birds to nest in.

So on that day, the children all gathered in my office and I started out by saying, "Who here thinks I can pick up an entire tree with my one hand?" Once the children had decided that would be quite a feat to witness, I made an exaggerated attempt to loosen up my arm and hand before picking up a single peach pit and pretending to struggle to lift it up to shoulder height.

Of course, the point of the show was that somewhere in that pit was a whole tree waiting to get out – that even in this part of the peach that we normally just throw away, was the potential to grow another tree that could give us more peaches.

To make the point of Jesus' parable about the mustard seed even more clear, I then held up a bunch of different types of seeds and we talked about what they might produce. A corn kernel would not produce carrots, despite some of the children's best efforts to

convince me otherwise. And no matter how much we wanted to plant hotdog seeds next to our mustard seeds, we would just have to go to the store to get our hotdogs.

But the part I was most excited about was the comparison of size between an avocado pit and the mustard seed. So, I poured some mustard seeds into my hand and held an avocado pit next to them, so that all of the children could see just how small a mustard seed really is. I even invited the children to touch the mustard seeds in my palm with their finger, rubbing it back forth as the seeds rolled underneath their delicate touch.

And then I would say something like, “Do you see how small the mustard seeds are? But even inside of them is a tree ready to grow so big that birds can make their home in its branches.”

Now up to this point, I felt pretty good about the lesson – interactive, engaging, thought-provoking. The children were getting it! They were getting the idea that great potential can even be packaged in really small things.

And then it happened...

In the hurry to get through this demonstration and on with the rest of the lesson, I did something careless – reckless even. Rather than carefully pouring all of those little mustard seeds that were in the palm of my hand into a bowl, I turned around and I dumped that handful of “potential” into my trashcan.

Friends, I am not exaggerating when I tell you the children’s jaws dropped as they stared at me in disbelief. Here, we had just learned about all of the great potential that exists for life and growth in this one little, tiny seed – a metaphor for the kingdom of heaven here on earth – and no sooner had the children gotten a clear grasp of the concept than I turned around and threw the seeds in the garbage.

That is what we in the profession call a “pastoral fail.”

I mean how could I do something so careless, so reckless, even? But here’s the kicker: all too often that is exactly how we treat this parable and the truth contained in it.

We hear its words, we grasp its meaning, and then we never let it germinate in our soul. And the thing is I think we need its words now more than any time in recent history.

What a strange time we are living right now. With a pandemic dominating our headlines, we have been reminded in a stark way that *death* can come in very small packages. But Jesus might take this moment to remind us that *death* is not the only thing that comes in small packages. *Life* comes in small, unlikely packages, too.

In fact, the kingdom of heaven is sown in this world everyday by small, seemingly innocuous acts of kindness that promote love and generosity and hope.

The kingdom of heaven is sown here on earth when Shannon Pinar sews hundreds of masks for home health workers and at-risk neighbors and gives them away for free.

The kingdom of heaven is sown here on earth when Sharon Schutz' neighbors pull a little red wagon through the neighborhood on Easter Sunday leaving small cups with soil and violas on each and every porch.

The kingdom of heaven is sown when I call Roy and Shirley Gardner, and they boast that over the last few weeks they have received several calls from church members asking if they need anything and just checking-in on them.

The kingdom of heaven is sown when Kent and Betty Lee Hill call up Helen Switzer on Sunday morning and lay their phone next to her speaker so that she can be with us in worship.

You see what I'm getting at? The kingdom of heaven isn't just where we're headed. It's who we are. And it's sown here on earth one little mustard seed at a time.

You don't need a big, green workbook to do it – just the smallest desire to be like Jesus.

So don't pull a pastor Dan this week, and throw your mustard seeds in the garbage. Find a way to sow them.

Because the kingdom of heaven finds its way to earth through the likes of something so small and unlikely that it is comparable to a mustard seed. And how much greater than a mustard seed are you?

Amen.