

Luke 13:18-21
Small But Mighty
Rev. Jonathan Cornell
9-11-16

I want to welcome you once again this morning, especially if you are a visitor or guest with us. It is good that we are here together to worship—and not just because we have a really fantastic meal being prepared for us, or the excitement of opening a 25-year-old time capsule after worship.

It is good that we are together in worship because we believe that God has something unique to say to every one of us today. Something good that will lead to our growth in becoming the people He intends us to be. This morning's message will be somewhat of a bridge between the series concluding today—a series in which we've looked at the compelling, beautiful dream God has for this world, He calls the Kingdom of God—and the next series we're calling "God of Wonders"—in which we will look together at the big stories of our faith and how God draws us into that story.

There is a philosopher named Alasdair MacIntyre who says: "I (we) cannot answer the question: 'what am I to do?' until we answer the prior question, 'of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'"

I don't know if you saw the recent film *Interstellar*, but in it Matthew McConaughey's character Cooper is probed by the lingering question, "What is our place in the Cosmos?" And when you start considering the possibilities of Interstellar Space Travel, with worm holes, black holes and Einstein's nagging theory of relativity, you can't help but face two daunting realities: number one, the cosmos is really big; and number two, I am not. But what the Bible tells us is that there is tremendous power in small things.

Our lives and all of creation are not merely the result of time and chance, but what Scripture tells us is that you and I are a part of a much larger ongoing narrative, God's narrative. This story began at creation and will reach its glorious consummation in what the Paul calls the Day of Christ. But for now, you and I have an important place in this grand Story. And this tells me one thing: God loves the little ones, God cherishes that which is small, and fills it with great potential.

Which is why Jesus told this great parable, the parable that we're concluding with today, yet another Kingdom Parable.

And he said therefore, "What is the Kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it?"

How many of you would say that your life is pretty normal? Nobel Prizes and Kennedy Center Honors aren't falling in your lap; you're not beating back professional sports contracts or campaign donor checks. Pretty normal, right? How about this: how many of you have ever been through a time in your life when you felt insignificant, isolated, like you were all alone in the world? I would guess that every single one of us has had a time in our lives when we felt that small. I know this because I had one such time. It was a time in college that, despite being surrounded by people, I felt utterly alone.

Jesus opens this important parable by asking this question: What is the Kingdom of God like? To what shall we compare it? And those listening that day might have envisioned him describing something regal, something glamorous, something all-together breathtaking in its spender. You see, in that day when a king or leader wanted to demonstrate the influence and power of his Kingdom, he would place it before his subjects using great displays of opulence and riches, and with jaw-dropping expressions of power. These kinds of Kingdom displays were meant to make the King's subjects feel small and ensure unquestioned loyalty and obedience to the king.

Jesus, on the other hand, takes this notion of the Kingdom and compares it thusly: **It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree.** Then in the following parable Jesus says, **it is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened.**

Jesus uses these two examples, the mustard seed and leaven, to describe to his audience what the Kingdom of God is like. The mustard seed is one of the smallest of all seeds, and yeast in its singular form is almost indistinguishable, yet within each is immense potential. There are two lessons that Jesus aims to teach us with these examples: one has to do with size and the other with power.

Within this little seed and this little ingredient, yeast, exists tremendous power. You ever put too much leaven in the dough, or you ever leave it out too long? Jesus says it has the power to change the entire composition of the dough. There is great power in small things; they have the ability to topple mountains even.

I thought of this example: I was in Yosemite National Park when I was a teenager and I recall the park ranger pointing our attention up to one of the mountains and saying, do you see that granite cliff? It is covered with lichen and eventually the lichen will find the cracks and crevices deep within the rock and will penetrate through it. One day, those little life forms will topple an entire mountain. Even though mountains like Half Dome and El Capitan are immense and imposing, they are dead, but hidden within tiny cracks and crevices is life. The lichen will one day level Half Dome for one simple reason: the lichen are alive. They are living, they have potential and can grow and spread—separating and compromising the strength of the rocks. The little lichen are stronger than El Capitan.

Life is a powerful thing. Jesus says that simply by inserting a little bit of his life, his power, into a few disciples, they were going to continue his mission. By giving the power of the Holy Spirit to the 70 gathered at Pentecost, he would topple the Roman Empire. By planting new churches throughout the Mediterranean that would stay and take care of the sick and dying during the Plague, while everyone else ran for their lives, they would transform culture and change the world. A little bit of yeast mixed into the dough can change the entire form of the bread.

Jesus gives these images of the mustard seed and the leaven for an important reason: there is great power in small things, there's might in the miniscule things God uses. When you are planted like that mustard seed, or when you are mixed like the yeast into a new environment, you have the power to change your surroundings.

The same goes for our church. If ever there was a parable that was in favor of investing your life in the Sunday School at Wabash Presbyterian Church, or in The Access Youth Center Ministry, it's this Parable. These little lives are like that mustard seed—they're small, seemingly insignificant. But

hidden within each of them is the potential to do immeasurable things.

Bob Bowman was a swimming coach from Baltimore who met up with an 11-year-old boy, the son of a single mother who had two other sisters. This 11-year-old boy came into his pool and told Bob Bowman that he wanted to swim. Well, that 11-year-old boy grew up. He grew up to have a pretty successful swimming career. His name is Michael Phelps, the most decorated Olympic Athlete in history, let alone swimming. And do you know who was by his side every step of the way? His coach, Bob Bowman.

This is a parable about investing in treasures that grow, in young lives. Do you know someone or something that you can invest in? We have opportunities for you to get involved in shepherding and nurturing the lives of our young ones. We need you, and I would also argue that you need this. Each of us grown-ups needs that opportunity to invest in the long term cultivation of a life—whether it's one of our own, or someone we help nurture as a Sunday School teacher, or youth leader, or as a Kids Hope Mentor.

Here's why you need it: because God's work in our lives grows when it is given time. In this parable that Jesus tells, time is on our side. Small things, like mustard seeds, can become big things over time. These parables are about gradual growth, gradual maturity, gradual sanctification. Jesus didn't tell us a parable about a magic bean that grew up instantaneously and became a great mustard tree. It is a good thing that our lives of faith and the lives of others do not grow up instantaneously.

There is another parable that Jesus taught, it's an opposite parable. It's in Matthew 6. Here Jesus says, **do not lay up for yourself treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.**

Jesus actually warns us about investing in things that are stagnant, things that don't grow. Invest in things that grow, be careful of the things that can rust. Investing in treasures that rust is investing in things that are in the process of decaying and dying—time is against you. But when we invest in things that grow, time is on your side because we are always growing. Invest in things that take time to grow and that are alive.

Finally, there's a characteristic of these two pictures, the leaven and the seed, that I believe is immensely important for us to remember—because it is a metaphor for us. Mustard seeds and leaven are small, miniscule in size, but eventually they spread, eventually they grow. Have you ever seen a mustard tree? Mustard seeds don't grow up like an oak tree or a sequoia, they are a low and ravenous growing tree.

There's a Roman historian from the first century named Pliny the Elder who wrote this in his text Natural History: "Mustard... with its pungent taste and fiery effect is extremely beneficial for the health. It grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted: but on the other hand when it is sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once."

The Kingdom of God in our church may not be like the oak tree or a sequoia, tall and grand, maybe it will be like the mustard shrub that grows low and wide near to the ground. But that's where Jesus was, close to the ground, close to the needs of those around him, close to the lowly, close to the

small, close to the overlooked. We would do well to always remember this picture of what kind of tree Jesus compares the Kingdom of Heaven.

The other thing that the Mustard Tree does, he says, is as it grows its branches, it become a nesting place for all sorts of birds. The foliage of the mustard tree is dense and thick; it provides great shelter for animals in need of protection from the sun or their enemies. I've invited some of the birds who make their nests in this place to be here with us this morning. Did you know that during the week, our Christian Education building is bustling with activity? There are a half dozen ministries serving the community of Wabash and beyond who make their home in our here in this tree. Organizations like CASA, Hands of Hope Domestic Advocacy, Musikgarten, Indiana Autism Society, Insource, Meals on Wheels, and the Presbyterian Preschool.

I invited them here to remind them and encourage them that they are a valued part of this church's ministry, and to remind you that these are the men and women we serve by making space available to them. But the building in which they make their home is in need of repair. That's why we are inviting each of you to make a special offering to help us cover the roof with our love, and also with new shingles.

Together, we are like this mustard seed planted here at the corner of Hill and Miami, but individually each of you is like that little unit of yeast. And when you leave this place today and go back to your homes, do you know that you are going back to the dough of your neighborhood? Each one of you is surrounded by neighbors who are like the ingredients, flour, water, baking powder, maybe even some salt, and with one another you make up the dough, but without the yeast, without the leaven, that dough cannot be the delightful, warm, nourishing bread it was meant to be.

I believe that this year, God is inviting not just our church, but all churches to recognize themselves as groups of leaven, sent back into neighborhoods all over Wabash in order to help that neighborhood rise. Over the course of this year, our session will be examining what it looks like for Wabash Presbyterian to have a greater neighborhood missional impact. We are going to help equip you and encourage you to build those relationships with your neighbors in a way that brings the flavor of God's love to those around you.

If there was ever an image for Wabash for such a time as this, it is the mustard seed and the leaven. Small in size, but great in power. So go invest in things that grow, time is on your side; don't worry about those things that are rusting or stagnant, consider the things that truly matter in God's Kingdom, those are the treasures we lay up for ourselves. Because there is great power in the small things.