

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

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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 being joined by the children of the Church in worship. Though both of those are reasons for us to be excited.

It is good that we are together in worship because we believe that when we gather, God has something unique to say to every one of us. Something good that will lead to our growth in becoming the people He intends us to be. This morning's passage has become a text close to my heart when I think of this community.

Over the last few months, as many of you are aware, we have faced a pretty difficult road as a family. And I think that I've come to something of a life epiphany as I look back, not just at the last year, but as I look back over the many years. Here's the epiphany: we don't always know what's good for us. We like to think we do, but we really don't.

I would encourage you to join me in a little reflective exercise. Think back to the experiences of your life that you didn't necessarily choose, but were thrust into, or were led sort of kicking and screaming. In the midst of these experiences you may have met someone, or learned something about yourself, or about God's goodness, that you wouldn't have otherwise learned—because if it were up to you, you wouldn't have gone there.

For Amy and me, it was a little country church off the Wabash River in far off Orio Illinois. God led us to that place 10 years ago, and there was a fair amount of kicking and screaming involved, and there was some kicking and screaming while we were there too. But in the midst of that experience of living in a small, off the beaten path community, we were able to encounter and share life with some really remarkable people, who would have been nowhere near our lives if it were up to us.

Life, as we have come to understand as—hopefully we've matured a bit—is not in the grand experiences, or in the powerful relationships, or the glamorous places. But we encounter a depth of life and closeness to Christ when we encounter openly the people whom God puts in our way. We learn the depth of life and meaning when we take those easily overlooked moments and give ourselves fully to them—even if we go kicking and screaming.

There is dynamic, life altering, power in common, easily overlooked things. Which is why Jesus so often spoke in parables, because there is wonderful miracles in everyday things.

**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?

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. He might have quoted Psalm 8 “How majestic is your name, the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars...” Or he might have recounted the opening verses of Genesis 1 where it describes God forming and separating, light from dark, water from the shores, sun and moon. Or he might have drawn our attention to the great kingdom and temple of Solomon, robed in splendor. Or even a great tree like the one described in Psalm 1 and Jeremiah 17, that was read over Caleb.

Anyone of these images demonstrate the influence and power of a King and his Kingdom. Anyone of these would surely make the subjects of that king know their place in the order, small, inconsequential, subservient.

But Jesus, on the other hand takes this notion of the Kingdom, and he describes it this way: **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 teaches 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 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 Godly Play Story teller, or as a nursery coordinator.

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 (do you know who his son was? Pliny the younger.) 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 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 Hands of Hope Domestic Advocacy, Musikgarten, Indiana Autism Society, Insource, Meals on Wheels and The Presbyterian School.

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.

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.