



Date: October 20 - 21, 2018
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Scripture: Luke 13 - The Mustard Seed

By the way, I want to say a big thank you to those many, many people who came up to me last week and said that they do actually know that the message series we devoted ten weeks to this past summer was called, *Table Talk* and the series that we devoted ten weeks to last summer was called, *Peculiar Treasures*. Thanks to the many people who actually remember sermons. You had to be here last weekend to understand what I am talking about. Jordan dissed preaching!

Seriously, our worship director, Jordan Elgie did a wonderful job last weekend, organizing the Toronto Mass Choir being with us and also teaching us some important reasons why we sing. So, well done. But remember, I do get the last word!

The excitement continues this weekend as we are baptizing eleven people in total in our services. Baptism is always a highlight for our faith community and we are also launching a new message series, entitled, *What's the Big Idea*. It is a series on the Parables of Jesus.

Parables. Are you familiar with Parables? Today, we may equate them more to fables, like the *Tortoise and the Hare* or the *Boy who Cried Wolf*. A story that contains a particular moral lesson. But parables are a little different. Parables were a common method Jesus used to teach spiritual truths. In the bible we see that Jesus was a master story teller. His parables are among some of the best known and more influential stories in history. Even those who have little knowledge or understanding of the bible or of Jesus, know about his stories through expressions like "The Prodigal Son" or "The Good Samaritan".

It is in the parables that the richness and relevance of the teachings of Jesus are most evident.

The word parable in the Greek, literally means, "to set beside" similar to the English word, comparison. In the culture of Jesus day, things were often explained not so much in statistics or definitions but in word pictures, in comparisons; parables, "to set beside".

In the gospels, Jesus taught a lot. At times, it was intentional teaching, but more often than not it was spontaneous, along the way. As he was walking along the road, someone would ask Jesus a question and he would respond and he usually used this amazing literary device called, parables. He would tell stories or draw on comparisons to try and drive home a deeper point or spiritual truth.

When teaching in parables, Jesus was speaking a language that the people of the day could relate to and they often had an emotional impact that made them more meaningful and memorable. Well, at least to those who had softened hearts and were open to listening and hearing what Jesus had to say.

At the same time, the parables often remain a mystery to those with hardened hearts because parables require the listener to be self-aware, humble and be willing to put themselves into the story. This is why many times in scripture when Jesus told a parable, the Pharisees and scribes (the upper crust of Jewish society, the religious elite), didn't seem to get it. They went away scratching their heads. Huh?

They were too proud to see themselves in any of the stories Jesus told and they were often shut out of the deeper spiritual truth he was getting at.

Today, as we open this series, we turned to an interesting section of scripture in Luke 13. If you had your bible, turn with me to the gospel of Luke.

Before we read the text, as always I need to give you a bit of background, a bit of context. In this passage, Jesus is actually formally teaching in a synagogue on the Sabbath, the holiest day of the week, when people would gather to worship God, much like we are doing today. In his audience on this day would have been a vast array of people, From the Jewish religious leaders and scribes to the regular Jewish citizens. The crowd was probably a little larger because Jesus was present and word had gotten out that he was healing people and his teaching was amazing.

Luke 13:10-11

One Sabbath day as Jesus was teaching in a synagogue, ¹¹ he saw a woman who had been crippled by an evil spirit. She had been bent double for eighteen years and was unable to stand up straight.

In the midst of his teaching, Jesus notices a woman with a physical ailment. She is hunched over and can't straighten up. She has endured this crippling state for 18 years. As the passage continues it says,

Luke 13:12-13

¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Dear woman, you are healed of your sickness!" ¹³ Then he touched her, and instantly she could stand straight. How she praised God!

Jesus cuts away from his sermon notes, calls the lady forward and heals her. With one touch, eighteen years of bone malformation and muscle atrophy is restored and she instantly stands straight as a rail. Can you image being in this crowd on this day and witnessing this miracle? It would have induced some gasps from the congregation but put yourself in the place of this woman. The text says, *How she praised God!* I bet she did.

Twenty years ago, October 1998, I had surgery to repair a ruptured and herniated disk in my back. For 8 weeks prior to surgery, I was hunched over, bed ridden and at times, in excruciating pain. When I heard the words, *surgery. You need surgery.* I was relieved and overjoyed. Someone was finally validating my plight. Surgery to me in my condition, meant hope for a better future was possible.

I can imagine that after 18 years of dealing with this misery, this now healed woman was like the Toronto Mass Choir last week in our church, swaying and dancing and praising God with her whole body. And we can't help but be ecstatic with her. Jesus has released from her ailment. *Hallelujah!* But not everyone was feeling the positive vibe.

Luke 13:14

¹⁴ But the leader in charge of the synagogue was indignant that Jesus had healed her on the Sabbath day. "There are six days of the week for working," he said to the crowd. "Come on those days to be healed, not on the Sabbath."

Jesus heals and restores this woman's body after eighteen long and debilitating years. What a miracle! Where there should be clapping and praising and singing, instead, some are caught in a technicality. They are more concerned that Jesus doesn't follow proper protocol.

Excuse me, excuse me. Can we lower the volume a bit? I know you are pretty worked up about what you just witnessed here but in the midst of all your celebrating, perhaps you didn't take note of the fact that today, is the Sabbath. There are six other days of the week that you could be healed. Not today. This is the day, we honour God. There is to be no healing on the Sabbath.

Can you imagine? Seems ridiculous to us, doesn't it? Until you stop and consider the times that we too can get caught up in the letter of the law, the proper way to do things or maybe the way that we have always done things, and miss the work of God, the movement of the Holy Spirit in our midst. Has that happened to you? It can happen here.

Here is my personal observation after 21 years of being a pastor. For whatever reason, it seems like the church, not just North Park, but the church in general can become so regimented in proper protocol, that we can miss the work of Jesus in our midst.

Just think back on last weekend right here and how awkward it was for many of us to actually stand up and clap our hands and even dance, move to the music as we were praising, the King of Kings and Lord of Lord, the one who saved us, Jesus. Why

was it awkward? Was it because it was evil or non-biblical? Quite the contrary. I think it was because it was different. We weren't used to it. That type of rigidity can kill our joy. Just like it did for religious leaders in the synagogue with Jesus on this day. What kind of a hard hearted, sourpuss could not celebrate with a woman who had been healed of a devastating physical condition after 18 years?

Too concerned about process. *That is not the way we have always done it before Jesus, you are stepping out of line.*

Here's the hard truth. I can be like these religious leaders too often. Too obsessed with the details, too concerned with proper protocol and procedures and I can miss the work of Jesus all around me. You? Look at how Jesus responds,

Luke 13:15-17

You hypocrites! Each of you works on the Sabbath day! Don't you untie your ox or your donkey from its stall on the Sabbath and lead it out for water? ¹⁶ This dear woman, a daughter of Abraham, has been held in bondage by Satan for eighteen years. Isn't it right that she be released, even on the Sabbath?" ¹⁷ This shamed his enemies, but all the people rejoiced at the wonderful things he did.

Jesus calls his opponents out. Hypocrites! He rebukes them for criticizing him when they also did work on the Sabbath. But somehow their work seemed more acceptable. There is now this tangible tension in the synagogue. There are those who love what Jesus is doing, healing and freeing people from their infirmities and those threatened by him. There's tension. And as only Jesus can do, he leverages this tension for a teachable moment, he tells a parable, actually two. Look at the text. Remember the scene before Jesus. A divided congregation.

Luke 13:18-19

¹⁸ Then Jesus said, "What is the Kingdom of God like? How can I illustrate it? ¹⁹ It is like a tiny mustard seed that a man planted in a garden; it grows and becomes a tree, and the birds make nests in its branches."

As that parable is rattling around in their heads, Jesus goes on

Luke 13:20-21

He also asked, "What else is the Kingdom of God like? ²¹ It is like the yeast a woman used in making bread. Even though she put only a little yeast in three measures of flour, it permeated every part of the dough."

It is amazing how we have this scene of Jesus teaching and healing in the Synagogue on the Sabbath, with the heightened tension of those in attendance and he decides he is going to tell a story, to share a parable, (remember a parable is to "set" beside or give a comparison). The topic that he chooses for this parable? The Kingdom of God.

Kingdom. We don't use that word too much in our world today. When we think of Kingdoms, our mind might go right away to fairy tales. The handsome prince searching his kingdom for the young lady whose foot would fit into the shoe left at his palace, in *Cinderella*. Perhaps the word kingdom is a little more familiar because of the popularity of Tolkien's trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, where we have the Kingdom of Mordor and Gondor or the Seven Kingdoms in the *Game of Thrones* television show.

In Biblical times, the term Kingdom was used quite extensively to refer to a rule or dominion of a king or queen. And we see the word Kingdom used in the first book of the bible Genesis right through to the New Testament. Throughout different periods of history, different Kingdoms rule. The Egyptian, Babylonian, Assyrian, Greek and Roman Kingdoms and usually each Kingdom that was reigning had achieved their status through force. They overpowered the existing Kingdom and took control over a realm or a region. Assyria defeated Israel, Babylon overtook Assyria and throughout history it goes.

Just before Jesus came to earth, the people of God, the Israelites were in dire straits. They were longing for the promised Kingdom of God to come. It would be a rule, a reign, anointed by God that would save them from the oppressive and brutal Roman Kingdom. The people were anticipating this kingdom would come in the same way all the other kingdoms had come, by a show of force and might. Led by a valiant military General, their Messiah.

Instead they get, Jesus and every chance Jesus got, he shared about the type of Kingdom he had come to usher in. It would be unlike anything, anybody had ever heard of before. Yet despite his constant teaching on what the Kingdom of God was like, it was hard to see what he was really getting at because whenever he talked about His kingdom, he used parables, stories and word pictures. My kingdom, it is like this.....

Maybe because in Jesus' day it was dangerous to talk about kingdoms. It was dangerous because there really only was one kingdom in that day and it was ruled by Caesars. The dreaded Roman Empire dominated the world at this time through brute force. It was a kingdom of power. A kingdom of the sword. That's the setting in which Jesus decides he is going to tell stories about a different kind of a kingdom not of power or force or of the sword but a kingdom of the seed. The Mustard seed. A tiny seed. If that is not ridiculous enough, Jesus went a step further. The Kingdom of God is also like, yeast. Which is a fungus. You know, like the same thing that gives you athlete's foot.

“What is the Kingdom of God like? Jesus asks. How can I illustrate it? I am glad you asked.

It is like a tiny mustard seed. Let me place that, beside it for comparison sake.

Or another way of thinking about it, *“What else is the Kingdom of God like? It's like yeast. I will put that right there, too.*

The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed and yeast. Are you kidding me? Can you see the irony here? The people are expecting and even hoping for a mighty armed force to save them and Jesus comes along and says it is like this, mustard and yeast.

What's the BIG IDEA!?

It's this radical Jesus again. He is turning everything upside down. The people are expecting one thing and instead it is almost the opposite. In this parable, don't you want to know more? Tell us more, Jesus. Why and how is the kingdom of God like mustard and yeast? I mean, he could have used so many other descriptions. Why did he say the Kingdom of God is like mustard and yeast?

I want to suggest to you three reasons why Jesus used the mustard seed and yeast as a parable for the Kingdom of God. There may be more reasons, but here are three.

1. The Kingdom of God starts small but it grows.

One of the central themes Jesus wants to get across in this parable is that the kingdom of God, starts small, but it is growing. It is like a mustard seed. It is like yeast.

God's presence and provision is felt all throughout the Old Testament, but when God decided to crash through dimensions and actually come to earth, how did he do it? Anyone?

Heaven came to earth, God's kingdom came to earth in the form, of a baby. A baby born in a stable. It's Jesus. The Kingdom of God starts small but then grows.

Let's talk a bit about mustard and yeast. We know mustard today as something we put on hot dogs, or in my wife's case, on hard boiled eggs, but that is another story. Yeast is the component in bread to make it rise or some of you may know it best as an ingredient in beer.

When Jesus compared the Kingdom of God to mustard and yeast the audience before him on this day would have had to stifle some laughter. There would have been some clearing of the throats. Mustard and yeast were not held in high esteem in this society.

You know what many in the audience would have been thinking? *Jesus, if you are going to compare your kingdom to something that grows, why not set it beside the Cedars of Lebanon.* A well-known tree of this day. The greatest of all trees, tall, majestic and sturdy.

The kingdom of God is like the Cedars of Lebanon, that would have instilled a little confidence in the crowd, amen brother, you preach it. But instead he goes with mustard and yeast!

By its very nature, the mustard is invasive. The plant was and is known for its persistence and resiliency. It has the ability to spread and keep on

growing even when it is unwanted. Farmers and gardeners despise the mustard plant because it can get into everything, it can invade every nook and cranny of a garden.

Anyone a fan of interlocking brick? Maybe you have it as your driveway? Patio? Deck? I too, believe it can be very attractive but when we were moving from Waterloo to London, five years ago and looked at houses, if it had interlock, I ran. Here's why.

We lived in a house in Waterloo for 17 years that had interlocking brick. A lot of it. I am sure the previous owners thought it was the sensible and attractive thing to do at the time, but I am convinced that they did it more to torment future owners, namely me. The problem was that weeds grew between the cracks of the brick. For seventeen years, I battled these weeds that were pervasive. I spent hour after hour in back breaking labour trying to pull them out by their roots. But in a matter of days, they returned.

I spent hundreds of dollars on environmentally and not so environmentally friendly sprays. But in a matter of days, they returned. I battled them with force, firing up the whipper snipper to try and blast them away but they returned with a vengeance, more pervasive than ever as if taunting me. Finally, the last straw, I poured gasoline all over the patio and lit it on fire, trying to burn those suckers away. No, I didn't really, but I used to lay awake at night dreaming of doing that. Of course the problem was not so much the interlocking but the weeds that grew between them that were hard to control and get rid of.

That is the mustard seed. It starts out quite small but can grow into a plant that spreads out and can take over everything. Nothing could stop it. There have been documented accounts of a mustard plant growing in the cracks of a boulder and literally splitting the boulder in half. The seed starts out as less than a centimeter in length and has the potential to split a massive boulder through its growth. Amazing.

The same can be said for the yeast. It is actually a fungus that expands when exposed to moisture, heat and sugar.

Like the mustard seed, the yeast is alive. Even though it is small it is constantly expanding. In baking, yeast's function is to ferment sugars present in the flour or added to the dough and this fermentation results in dough expanding or rising. It is then used to make light and fluffy bread or better yet, cinnamon rolls.

Jesus probably uses these illustrations to demonstrate that the Kingdom of God even though it starts small and is not what people expect it is constantly growing and expanding and in that growth it has power in often times, very subtle ways.

The Kingdom of God, that Jesus spoke about and represented was not a full frontal assault on the powers of this world, the revolution of Jesus was an almost hidden movement one life at a time, one act of love at a time, growing to take over the world like a pesky weed. The harder people try to get rid of it, the more it grows, the faster it spreads.

The second reason that Jesus used the mustard and yeast parable to describe his Kingdom:

2. The mustard seed and yeast both need something to be activated.

They don't stand on their own. A mustard seed is useless unless something is done with it.

In this parable, notice that Jesus says the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that *a man planted in a garden*. It was planted. A mustard seed sitting on a table is nothing more than unfulfilled potential. But when the seed is planted, watered and nourished, it splits, it cracks open and rises to meet its full purpose. See mustard is not only a wildly growing plant, it is one of the more versatile of herbs. When it is crushed it can be used as food, for medicinal purposes, as a spice or a condiment.

Don't you find it ironic that Jesus compares his kingdom to a mustard seed that has split or cracked open? Could it be that Jesus is saying in his kingdom, the power comes from being crushed not in doing the crushing?

And he demonstrated this only a short time later with his victory over the Roman sword by his death

on the cross. At the cross upon his death, the power of God took over. The earth shook, the sky turned black and the curtain in the temple tore in two. That is power that was demonstrate upon Jesus' death.

In a similar way, mustard must be crushed, ground, planted or split open for its power to be released. That is life in the kingdom of God. It is in becoming less that God's power is released in us.

And yeast. You see it sitting here in a bottle, doing nothing. Something has to happen to it to achieve its potential, its purpose. It has to be worked and kneaded into the dough.

Look at the verse again,

Luke 13:20-21

“What else is the Kingdom of God like? ²¹ It is like the yeast a woman used in making bread. Even though she put only a little yeast in three measures of flour, it permeated every part of the dough.”

Three measures of flour would make a lot of dough. Enough to make 45 loaves of bread. Have you ever kneaded flour for just a few loaves of bread? No cheating using a bread maker! It takes a lot of effort to work the yeast into the dough. You can't just throw it on top of the flour and expect something to happen. It has to be worked in to do its job.

Jesus says, that's what the kingdom of God is like. We are the yeast and we have to mix into our world. We are to permeate our world with the love of the Kingdom. It may not be easy or comfortable, but it is necessary form maximum impact.

Which leads to point #3. Why does Jesus use the mustard seed and the yeast to describe his Kingdom?

3. He used the mustard seed and yeast to describe His Kingdom because they were unexpected.

They were messy. These metaphors would have drawn a reaction from this crowd on this day. That was the power of a parable.

For all of its potential benefits, Jewish people didn't like the mustard seed mostly because it produced the mustard plant and the mustard plant messed with their sense of order and control.

In this culture, there were very strict rules about order and control, dictated by whom? The religious leaders and Pharisees of the day. They were very strict rules about how you kept your garden. It had to be organized and tidy. Crops were planted in straight rows with sticks marking where one stopped and another began.

One of the secrets of a well-kept garden, KEEP OUT MUSTARD!! It was notorious for invading the order and soon taking over everything. For all the benefits of mustard as a food, medicine, and spice, it was messy and inconvenient. Keep it out. It may not surprise you that there was even a Jewish law that forbid planting mustard intentionally in a garden.

The Jewish people of this day were not big fans of yeast either. It was a fungus for heaven's sake. There were numerous laws on their books for ritual purity and cleanliness. You don't mess with yeast.

Does this remind you of anything? Do you remember the context for Jesus telling this parable? The Jewish leaders couldn't celebrate the life of a woman who had been healed after 18 years of misery because their law forbid healing on the Sabbath. It messed with their sense of control.

Are you beginning to see how brilliant Jesus was in comparing his kingdom to mustard and yeast? It's unexpected and rattles the status quo of this society. So who in the crowd that Jesus was addressing in the synagogue, would have been open to what he had to say about the Kingdom of God?

There was a mix of people in that audience in the synagogue. They were all Jews no doubt but some were from the upper echelon of society, the religious elite. There were also probably a lot of poor and powerless from the lower rungs of society. They were the ones who were tiny, insignificant nobodies in this day. They were unexpected to ever accomplish anything in life.

Wealth and power were what shaped and influenced this culture. If you didn't have them, you were nothing. You just didn't matter. You could never change the prevailing attitudes of the world.

Yet, Jesus came and challenged that assumption. He looks into the faces of the poor and needy, the sick and frail and envisions with them, a different kind of kingdom. A kingdom that values smallness, humility and the unexpected. And isn't it interesting that the kingdom that Jesus spent so much time talking about, began to attract those who were deemed to be the least of the least in that society. Those such as the fishermen, farmers, tax collectors and even women. Within a hundred years, the Kingdom of God had spread like wildfire. Do you know how? It was mostly due to persecution.

It was when the early Christians were crushed and seemingly defeated, split open for their faith that the Kingdom of God spread most rapidly, like a mustard plant, like yeast in a batch of flour, all throughout the Roman Empire.

It has continued to grow all throughout human history to this point and it is still growing even today. The kingdom of God is still growing today. Do you know what is left of the Assyrian Kingdom? The Babylonian Kingdom? The Roman Kingdom? It is all rubble. Greece a wonderful place to visit but the remnants of the ancient Greek Kingdom, lie in ruins.

But the kingdom of God, it presses on. Growing and spreading all around the world. One life at a time, one act of love and kindness in the name of Jesus at a time, and it is changing our world.

Oh, I know, you say *but Paul the church seems to be on the decline in Canada and the US* but we are too shortsighted.

Let me tell you about China. Christianity arrived in China around 653 AD. Catholic missionaries arrived in the 1300's, five hundred years later came Protestants missionaries such as Robert Morrison and Hudson Taylor. By 1920's more than ten thousand foreign missionaries were scattered around China.

But persecution broke out against Christians in China in the 1950's. It was a savage time and by 1953 almost all foreign missionaries had been expelled or martyred in China. But that was it, the seed was crushed, broken open and the Kingdom of God began to grow.

Subversive, hidden at first but little by little, person by person it spread and spread. Today, there are estimated to be 120 million Christians in China, compared to 4 million in 1950.

We have a vibrant Chinese ministry at North Park and today they will baptize 3 people in their service. The Kingdom of God is advancing like a mustard seed, like yeast today in our world and we haven't even talked about Africa and South America.

Doesn't this just excite you? Not just that the kingdom of God is spreading but also how meaningful and powerful Jesus' teaching is.

Do you see how Jesus' message goes deep and how easily those who hear his words only at face value can miss out on so much? But for those with teachable spirits, open hearts and ears to hear and eyes to see, the whole world is open to a new way. We are given a new hope filled perspective and a purpose in the Kingdom of God.

What is Jesus calling us to today? What is stirring in your soul? In your spirit today? What's the Big Idea? The Kingdom of God is advancing no matter what, but we are invited to be actors in the story. To carry the message of Jesus out into the world where we have been placed.

So, can I ask you, how are you being like mustard or yeast in your home, your neighbourhood, your school or your workplace? How are you allowing the love and hope of Jesus to be on full display in your life through all that you do and say?

Is that your prayer today? Are you open to being used by God to continue to advance his Kingdom in our world, one day at a time, one life at a time, for His purpose and glory?

Amen? Amen.

Points to Ponder

What's the Big Idea?

Luke 13 ~ The Mustard Seed

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Brainstorm and make a list of the parables Jesus told in the bible. Which parable is your favourite and why? What do you think is the “big idea” of that parable?
2. In your experience in the church, can you think of some examples where routine and protocol has taken precedent over the work of God? Discuss your thoughts around the ways the church can be more flexible to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Have you seen rigidity kill the joy in a church?
3. Discuss the concept of the Kingdom of God. What does it mean that the Kingdom of God is in our midst? What are some tangible expressions of that reality?
4. Share a time in your life when you have been “crushed” like a mustard seed, yet have seen the evidence of God and His Kingdom so profoundly in your circumstance?
5. Describe a time when you, like yeast, tried to work yourself into a situation or circumstance so that you could share the hope and love of Jesus either through words or actions.
6. Where and how do you see the Kingdom of God spreading and growing in your life or the world?

Prayer and Action Item

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Pray specifically for opportunities to share the love and hope of Jesus in the places you go and the Kingdom of God will continue to spread into the world.