

Matthew 13:31-32 NRSV

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

³¹ He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³² 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."

Like the Parable of the Sower from last week, this parable appears in three of the four gospels (Mark 4:30-34 ; Luke 13:18-19). It is a relatively short parable but I think that Jesus only had to say a little because for the folks of that time, you only had to mention the mustard plant and a story emerged in their mind. They didn't need all the details, they got the main point. There are some cultural references that are so familiar to people that when you just start the story, everyone can fill in the blanks.

For instance, if I started my story by saying-

When I was 17, I thought I was grown and didn't need a curfew. So one night.....
I don't even have to finish the sentence for you to guess the main point. There are a lot of different things that could have happened in that story, but no matter what happened you can be sure that the night ended with me being in a lot of trouble.

Or for those who have ever been a slave to fashion I could say –
For this event I just had to wear the 4 inch pumps I bought the day before.....
Again, there could be different sequences of events, but you know the night ends with my feet hurting so much that I want to cry.

However; I surmise that almost no one in this congregation has really worked with mustard seeds and mustard plants – my goal this afternoon is to fill in for you, a picture that would have been clear for those who walked in Jesus time. My task is to fill out the story for you so that together we can understand what Jesus is saying about the Kingdom of God.

I need the gardeners to be my amen corner. I am going to do my best to preach this sermon so that everyone understands, but even if I don't quite deliver to perfection or if my illustrations don't touch the heart of those who could kill a cactus plant – I am hoping that I can at least get through to the gardeners. So if you have ever planted a seed that wouldn't grow or had to fight off a bug infestation or carried around a tomato or squash like it was a prized possession or got so excited when your flowers finally bloomed – if you have had any of these experiences then I need you to say Amen.

Now that I got an amen corner, I want you to stay with me while we take a moment to understand this mustard seed that Jesus speaks of. When we think of mustard it conjures

images of hot dogs and sandwiches. For others of us we might think of mustard greens as a good addition to a pot of collards, but in Jesus' time mustard had some different and more significant uses.

No one knows exactly when the first mustard plant emerges, however historians have found reference to the plants in texts from 3000 BC that suggest mustard may have first been used in India. By the time that Jesus walked the earth mustard plants were important for both their medicinal and culinary applications. People would have known that mustard seeds can be used to reduce fevers or relieve muscular or skeletal pain. Ground mustard seeds were a power and popular spice in that time.

In addition to knowing about the benefits of mustard plants they would have known about the life-cycle of that plant. They would have known that it starts out as a very small seed. That once you planted that seed, if it could begin to grow quickly on its way become one of the biggest bushes in your garden. They would have known that it produces small yellow flowers and then the seed pods would form. They would have known that those seed pods would produce thousands of seed and that once the plant came to maturity, those pods would burst and spread out over the land to create more mustard plants. And they definitely would have known that once those seeds get out into the land there would be no stopping them, they would grow in abundance in such a way that they could not be stopped! So when Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God being like a mustard seed it would have been clear to those listening, that he was talking about something that starts small and becomes abundant.

Most of the listeners probably knew the mustard plants in their own community and region, but they might not have known that mustard plants are a global phenomenon. They probably didn't realize that there are mustard species that have adapted to ever part of the earth. What are the three kinds of mustard? –

- i. Brassica alba – is known as white or yellow mustard
- ii. Brassica juncea – is brown mustard
- iii. Brassica nigra – is black mustard

They each have different flavors and properties but they are all mustard. Some have more spice, others are smoother but they all have the same basic plant properties with adaptations that allow them to grow in different parts of the world.

The same is true for God's Kin(g)dom. The truth is the same, but God makes the flavor and culture of the Word adapt to the different peoples of the world. And for me that makes me excited. It means we have the opportunity to see how God is working in different ways to reach people. We can enjoy the melodic worship of a classical flute or we can move to the intoxicating beat of a djembe drum. Sometimes you want some Gulden's Brown Mustard and sometimes you want some Grey Poupon!

Christ uses the mustard seed as the kin(g)dom of God. And as I studied about the mustard seed I started to get more and more excited about the Kin(g)dom of God. I think we all want to live in a kin(g)dom where small seeds bear big fruit, where diversity is the spice of life and where the

fruit that we bear as humans can put us in right relationship with the birds creating a space where we all can live and thrive.

So it begs the questions – what the heck is keeping us from reaching that Kin(g)dom of God? To answer that question I want to look at three things that can cause the mustard seed to struggle that –

1. When Seedlings Grow Too Fast

The second greatest danger to the mustard seed bearing good fruit rapid and excessive growth. The mustard plant grows pretty fast, but if it grows too fast the leaves are too bitter and the seeds are not as fertile. Growth can be good, but if it is flash in the pan growth then it is not so good. For the mustard plant to grow well it has to spend some time in the cold. It has to be a little tested so that it can be strong. That is why they tell you to plant in the winter and not in the summer, because the best plants have been a little tested. We cannot be afraid to face the cold, in fact we have to welcome that cold as part of building God's kin(g)dom in our lives and in the world.

2. Too Many Consumers and not Enough Cultivators

What do I mean by that? The cultivator focuses on bringing the plant to its full potential but the consumer is the person who just take the parts for their personal use rather than focusing on growing the plant to its full potential. If the plant has more consumers than cultivators then it ends up just getting worn out. It is great to eat some of the leaves, but if you pick them all then you risk the health of the plant. It is fine to take some of the seeds but if you take all of them then no new plants can grow.

3. Root Rot

The number one danger to Mustard Plants is root rot. Sometimes the fungus gets to the plant at the seedling stage and takes it out, but sometimes it lets the plant grow on the surface while it is taking over the plant underneath. This problem is all too common in our lives and in our churches. Sometimes we start out looking really good on the surface, but if you dig underneath you will find that our roots are corrupted by sin and stagnation. We look happy on Sunday, but when you look underneath the surface you find a very different picture.

Root rot comes from diseases in the soil or stagnation and lack of air flow. What does that look like – it looks like people maybe coming to get their fill of seed on Sunday but not paying attention to their spiritual life the rest of the week so they don't have a practice that helps them stay grounded. It looks like us being so focused on our own needs that we don't stand in the gap for others. It may also look like you giving so much to everyone else that you have nothing left for your own sustenance.

We want to eat the seeds now for our own benefit and so instead of growing into a worldwide movement, we are a bunch of small bushes that can't grow into a prolific patch because it constantly being syphoned off. We have to be so thirsty for the Kingdom of God that we are

willing to sacrifice some of our current comfort for the bigger harvest. As we see God begin to move are we willing to put the bigger picture in front of our own personal gain.

If you want mustard plants to really take over you plant your first plant. You can eat the leaves but not too many. You have to protect the plant from root rot. You have to really nurture that first plant until the flowers come. As the flowers come, the leaves will start to taste more bitter. This is where some gardeners will tell you to just pick the flowers and pull up the plant. But if you stay the course. If you let those flowers bloom, they will release seedlings in the thousands and those seedlings will drop onto the ground and begin to start a new crop of mustard plants. From that one plant you can see amazing growth if you are willing to stick it in and let that first plant explode. But see too many of us don't want the leaves to get bitter, we don't want to wait for the death, and because of that we don't get the abundance of life that we need personally nor the strength of community that is necessary for God's community to grow.

So today, I ask you – what has to change in your soil so that the Kingdom of God can come?

The beauty is that you don't need to be big and great. If you have faith the size of a mustard seed God can work with you.....

1. If God values our diversity, what are you doing to celebrate and learn from the beauty of our different cultural flavors?
2. What do you need to do to avoid root rot? Where are their areas of stagnation that you need to address?
3. If the world has too many consumers and not enough cultivators, what can we be doing as a congregation to encourage us towards cultivation rather than consumerism?