

“Mustard Seed”

"He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and 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).

Jesus said the kingdom of God is like a grain of mustard seed. Botanists tell us that there *are* seeds smaller than the mustard seed, but in Jewish thought a mustard seed was *proverbially* the smallest of seeds. This tiny seed quickly grows into a large shrub, as high as 10 feet. It's so large and bushy that birds lodge in its branches.

The kingdom of God – the rule or reign of God – is like that mustard seed. It starts from *small, insignificant beginnings* – but produces *great and far-reaching results!*

When you think about it, the kingdom of God began in tiny, almost unnoticeable ways. Jesus began His ministry by announcing that God's kingdom or rule was beginning to break into the world through Him – yet in many ways it didn't look like it! Jesus spent 30 years as an ordinary carpenter in the little village of Nazareth. His closest followers were an unimpressive group of nobodies. His teaching was pretty much rejected by the religious establishment. A noted Bible scholar, Gunther Bornkamm, said this parable must have been told “as an answer to the headshaking and the questions which have been posed hundreds of times, right from the first days: an unknown rabbi of Nazareth in a remote corner of Palestine? A handful of disciples, who, when it came to the show down, left Him in the lurch? A doubtful mob following Him – publicans, loose women, sinners, and a few women and children and folk who got help from Him? On His cross the sport of passers-by? Is this the kingdom of God? The shift of the ages?”

If Jesus' ministry in the first century looked like a tiny movement without much clout or significance, *the ministry of Jesus' followers today often appears to be just as unimpressive.* Compared to the secular world, what the church has to offer often seems puny and woefully underwhelming. Drive around on Sunday morning, and you'll see the parking lots of grocery stores full, shoppers out at Home Depot and Walmart...while many churches struggle to fill the seats for worship. The median attendance for all churches in the U.S. is 65 people. This means half of all churches average less than 65 people in worship. This number is down from 137 in 2000!

It's nothing to get 40,000 or 50,000 people out to a stadium for a baseball or football game. Yet I've been to how many Bible studies over the years where we're lucky to get 7 or 8 people. German theologian, pastor, and author Helmut Thielicke had a sermon on this parable of the mustard seed in his book *The Waiting Father*. He told how, when he first became a pastor during the time when Hitler was in power, he conducted his first Bible study. He was determined in his ministry to claim Jesus' promise, “All power is given to me in heaven and on earth”, and to believe that in spite of Hitler, God was in control. But, in contrast to battalions of youth marching to the drumbeat of another lord outside, 2 elderly ladies, an organist older yet, came to that Bible study! Thielicke reflects: “This was all (God) had to set before me that evening. What *did* He have to offer, anyway?”

Commercial film makers spend millions of dollars using sophisticated technology and breath-taking special effects to produce films that often run counter to the Christian message, or feed into peoples' lower nature. The television industry spends millions of dollars to give Americans a steady diet of trash. On the other hand, the Church and Christianity's venture into filmmaking and TV programming often looks amateurish and pale in comparison. Check out some of the religious programs on Christian networks. I remember one program where an elderly preacher was behind a pulpit, preaching a rather dry sermon, and during the whole program there was just one camera angle – a frontal view of this preacher. That was it. Compare that to the staging of American Idol! All of this reminds me of the time I was a guest on a local TV program out of Stroudsburg, PA. It was just the host and me in the studio. During the program, the host had to get up out of his seat, go to the camera on the tripod, and adjust the angle so the TV picture could be centered!

A little mustard seed. That's what the Church so often looks like, when it comes up against modern political structures, the reality of global economics, the power of multinational corporations, the influence that TV networks and social media platforms have on our thinking and behaviors. We often look puny – hopelessly outclassed - and to many people – irrelevant.

But Jesus did not tell this parable to put people down in the dumps! Rather, it is a story of hope and promise! *God's kingdom, God's rule, starts with small, insignificant beginnings, but results in unbelievably huge outcomes!* There is a dynamic potency in this tiny seed that produces incredible results. This little mustard seed, which can't move on its own power, is placed into the soil, and then begins to take root and grow, to push and shove, until eventually it spreads into a large bush.

That's the way it is when the seed of God's Word and message is sown! It falls into the soil of the human heart. At first, it appears as though nothing is happening. But it takes root and begins to grow – it pulls and shoves and tugs and pushes until people are reborn spiritually and begin to change! Often it's such a *tiny seed*... a passage from the Bible, a sentence from a sermon, a humble Christian sharing a personal testimony or faith story, some act of kindness done in Jesus' name...and *people* are changed...*relationships* are changed...*situations* are changed! That's the way the kingdom begins. That's the way God establishes His rule on earth!

When you think about it, that's been the story of Christianity. Many of you have probably heard of this piece of writing called "One Solitary Life". It goes like this: "Let us turn now to the story. A child is born in an obscure village. He is brought up in another obscure village. He works in a carpenter shop until he is thirty, and then for three brief years is an itinerant preacher, proclaiming a message and living a life. He never writes a book. He never holds an office. He never raises an army. He never has a family of his own. He never owns a home. He never goes to college. He never travels two hundred miles from the place where he was born. He gathers a little group of friends about him and teaches them his way of life. While still a young man, the tide of popular feeling turns against him. One denies him; another betrays him. He is turned over to his enemies. He goes through the mockery of a trial; he is nailed to a cross between two thieves, and when dead is laid in a borrowed grave by the kindness of a friend.

Those are the facts of his human life. He rises from the dead. Today we look back across nineteen hundred years and ask, What kind of trail has he left across the centuries? When we try to sum up his influence, all the armies that ever marched, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned are absolutely picayune in their influence on mankind compared with that of this one solitary life...".

Over the years, again and again, I've seen how a tiny mustard seed that's planted – some seemingly insignificant act or happening - by the power of God - produces amazing results for God and His work on earth!

I'd like to share one of the most powerful "mustard seed stories" in my life. Some of this perhaps you've heard before – but I never tire of telling this God-story.

Some years ago I had reached a point in my ministry where I felt the church I was serving had to be more global in its thinking. We had done a fair job reaching out to our community, but I felt I had failed to lead the church to broaden its thinking to Christ's mission in the *world*. I confessed in a sermon how I had failed to provide that leadership for the congregation.

Soon afterwards, I held a course for lay people to develop their preaching skills (I called it "Preaching 101"). We sent a news release to the local newspaper about the course, and they did a feature story on it. As a result, we had quite a number of people from all over Lancaster country sign up for the course. Among them was a native of Kenya named Eric Wanga. After the first session, Eric came up to me and said, "Most pastors in Kenya have no training. Why don't you go to Kenya and offer this course to them." Well, Kenya was not even on my radar screen. I was nearing retirement. But I kept Eric's words in the back of my mind. I prayed about this, and said, "Lord, if you want me to go, I'll go." I said nothing more about this to Eric, and prayed that if God wanted me to go, He would have Eric say something to me. After the final class, as we were walking out, Eric came up to me and asked whether I had thought more about traveling to Kenya. I had. And so I went!

One other person from our congregation went with me, along with Eric and his family, to a little village called Musese, and to a small church in the village. I preached the Sunday morning after we arrived, and *my sermon text was this parable of the mustard seed*. During our time there, I taught pastors and church leaders, and also preached at an outdoor evangelistic service.

When I went, I was determined not just to minister to the *spiritual* needs there, but also see where our congregation could help with the practical, material needs of the people. I asked leaders in the church in Musese what they needed. They replied that there were so many needs! But we settled on digging a well for the community, and establishing a trade school to address the rampant unemployment in that area.

Back home, our church took a special Christmas offering. We had already given money to put electricity in the Musese church. Our people gave generously. Within the next year a well was dug – commercially dug. Land next to the church became available for sale (surprise!). We

purchased that adjoining property. We put up a fence. The land is now farmed, providing food for the village. Cows were purchased for milking.

In the meantime I was moved to another church. I chose not to say anything about my work in Kenya to my new congregation. But through an amazing "coincidence" (a God-thing), someone in my new congregation was related to someone in the church I had left, and *they brought up* what was happening in Kenya. This church then invested in the mission. With their help we constructed two new buildings on the property – to be used for a medical clinic, a trade school, Sunday School rooms and a pre-school. On one of our trips our team built a chicken coop so the people could raise chickens. Recently, Eric Wanga was at Community UMC and spoke about how God is blessing the work. That little church in Musese has grown, and it has given birth to 9 or 10 other churches! All, because of one little mustard seed was planted!

So don't give up. Don't be disheartened. Plant your mustard seed for God wherever you can. And trust God for the rest. For even when it seems like nothing is happening, God is at work!

This parable of the mustard seed is closely related to another parable Jesus told – the parable of the sower. Jesus tells of a farmer who sows seed, and even though the seed falls in three types of soil where it does not produce any good results, (seed that falls by the wayside, on rocky soil, and soil where weeds take over) the point of the parable is that when the seed of God's Word is sown, it produces an unbelievable harvest! "But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understand it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty time what was sown" - an unheard of yield (Matthew 13:23)!

I think this is a word for Community UMC. Like so many other churches, our attendance has been declining. We're a congregation of mostly elderly people. We've tried many approaches for getting new people into the church, with little to show for our efforts. It's so easy to get discouraged, and be tempted to give up, to view what's happening as the closing chapters of the life of this church. But what if we view it as *the beginning of the rebirth of Community UMC.* And that this new church start may look a lot different, because our world is a lot different! Can we see this parable as a challenge to be faithful in preaching and teaching and living out the truth of God's Word – and trust that God will bring the harvest! That each of us can be a little "mustard seed", doing our small part, to enable God to stretch His kingdom on earth.

One of my favorite Scriptures is Jeremiah 29:11 "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." This verse was written during a terrible time for God's people. The nation was going down to defeat. God was judging Israel for her sins. But in the midst of all that, God speaks a word of promise and hope through the prophet Jeremiah.

Can we claim this Scripture for our situation! We don't have to be a big wheel or a big church to have an impact on people, our community, and beyond! God's kingdom begins in small, insignificant, often imperceptible ways. But don't underestimate the power of God to work with what we offer Him – even if it's small. *That's what this mustard seed parable is all about!*

