

Parable of the Mustard Seed

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Matthew 13:24-30

Sermon Series: The Kingdom of God

How does a preacher talk about Pentecost, Mother's Day and a capital campaign in a single sermon?

This congregation gives me free reign in the pulpit. I can pretty much preach on any subject I choose. When it comes to the second Sunday in May, however, it's a different story. I learned this lesson the hard way as a novice preacher. I chose not to preach on a Mother's Day theme on Mother's Day. Horror of horrors! I had disregarded one of the big three holidays: Christmas, Easter and Mother's Day. Let me tell you, I heard about it!

Easter arrived on March 23rd this year. The next year Easter will occur this early will be 2285 AD. Pentecost follows 50 days after Easter, so this year it falls on Mother's Day. Pentecost has been called the birthday of the church. Jesus' disciples were gathered in Jerusalem with other pilgrims to observe the festival of Pentecost in the book of Acts. Suddenly, tongues of fire descended upon the disciples, who began to speak in all the languages of the known world. These pilgrims could hear the gospel in their native tongues. Three thousand people became Christians that day.

So, what will it be on this second Sunday of May, Pentecost or Mother's Day? Tongues of fire or motherhood? You want to know a secret? I wanted to title this sermon, "Your Mama's on

Fire" or "Hot Mamas," but I chickened out!

Now, add to the mix that our church is in the middle of an Open Doors-Open Hearts Capital effort. This is our third and final campaign to support the building of our Ministry Center, which opened two years ago.

How does a preacher talk about Pentecost, Mother's Day and a capital campaign in a single sermon? I've got it! Flaming tongues of fire will descend on mothers to inspire them to give huge amounts of money to our capital campaign.

Since January, we've been preaching on the kingdom of God. Jesus announced, "The kingdom of God has come near" (Mark 1:14-15). The kingdom of God has come near to mothers and fathers, children and senior citizens. Jesus said, "Those who have ears to hear; let them hear" (Matthew 13:9, 43).

Jesus strings seven parables together in Matthew 13 on the kingdom of God. This mustard seed reference is now the third parable in as many Sundays that deals with sowing seed. Jesus' agrarian references shouldn't surprise us. His parables are simple stories drawn from daily life to illustrate a deeper truth.

We learned on previous Sundays that we are sowers of the seed. We sow seeds of faith for Jesus Christ. Since we cannot determine whether

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people's hearts will be receptive or hard as asphalt, we sow seeds of faith everywhere!

We move today from talking about seeds in the aggregate to the yield of a single seed. "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed a farmer sows in his field." It is the smallest of all the seeds," Jesus declares (Matthew 13:31-32).

A mustard seed in Jesus' day was proverbial for its smallness. Technically speaking, a mustard seed is not the smallest seed. The distinction of the smallest seed belongs to the orchid seed. In any event, a mustard seed is exceedingly small. It measures one millimeter in diameter, about the size of a pinhead. Although the smallest of seeds, when it is full grown, it becomes an 8-10 foot tree, so that birds can make their nests in its branches.

Jesus told a second related parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in three measures of flour until all of it was leavened" (Matthew 13:33). This woman takes her baking seriously. Three measures of flour would feed a family reunion. By mixing baker's yeast into Pillsbury flour, the action of the yeast breaks down the sugar in flour, which creates carbon dioxide. When these carbon dioxide gases are heated, the dough is forced to expand, causing the bread to rise. Louis Pasteur called this process fermentation. Jesus called it a lesson on the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God begins small. A small mustard seed produces a tree where birds nest, just as a tiny quantity of yeast produces enough bread to feed an army.

There were those in Jesus' day who expected the kingdom of God to appear all at once. They anticipated the kingdom's coming to be sudden and unmistakable. The kingdom of God has indeed come, but not in the spectacular, unmistakable manner in which people expected it.

Jesus' ministry begins as small as a mustard seed. At the outset, growth in the kingdom of God appears small and insignificant, especially alongside the world's superpowers. Jesus seemingly does not stand a chance against the powerful Roman Empire and influential Pharisaical lobby.

Why doesn't Jesus seize the moment and use force to usher in the kingdom of God? Jesus warns us not to judge the end of God's kingdom by its beginning. Jesus promises results out of all proportion to its initial size. Never judge the end of something by its beginning.

I would have chosen a more aggressive approach to usher in the kingdom of God. I would have been tempted to employ a Madison Avenue public relations firm to herald Jesus' entrance into our world. Massive media coverage would have followed his every move.

Yet, what does all this marketing achieve? How many times do rock stars and much heralded athletes

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skyrocket to fame, but then, just as quickly, fade from the limelight? God chooses a more subtle approach in reaching this world with love. While Jesus' ministry attracts a relatively insignificant number of followers in the beginning, his message gradually ferments. Today, over two billion people worldwide identify themselves as his followers. Small seeds can yield big time results.

Evil seems, at present, to be having a field day. But things aren't always what they seem. Despite appearances, the kingdom of God is growing.

The kingdom of God grows inauspiciously at first. Growth in the kingdom of God has an unseen quality to it, like yeast in dough and seeds buried in the ground. Initially, when we sow seeds, nothing seems to happen. That's because all the growth takes place below the surface.

When Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf was a teenager at the Halle Academy in Germany, this parable inspired him, along with five other friends, to form the Order of the Mustard Seed in 1715. They each wore a ring inscribed with the motto "None live for themselves." They solemnly pledged to be true to Christ, to be kind to people and to take the truth of the gospel to the nations. For Zinzendorf, this meant mobilizing Christian missionaries to take the gospel to distant lands and unreached people groups.

In 1731, Count Zinzendorf met Anthony Ulrich, an African slave from the West Indies, who told

him about the terrible conditions facing plantation slaves. Zinzendorf shared their plight with the Order and two volunteers stepped forward to live among the slaves and preach the gospel. More missionaries followed. Half of them died from being shipwrecked or yellow fever. When Zinzendorf arrived at the West Indies in 1736, he didn't know if he would find a surviving mission. What he discovered was a vibrant church of 800 people. The Order of the Mustard Seed not only spawned the first organized Protestant mission to the West Indies, it spread to Africa, America and Russia. Small seeds can yield big results!

The original nine who built our chapel had no idea those meager beginnings along Church Street would yield such a bumper crop.

You never know, as mothers and fathers, teachers and coaches, what seeds of faith planted today in the hearts of young people will yield tomorrow.

In 1980, our church agreed to help a Cambodian refugee family relocate in the Vienna area. Some of you may know this story, since I recently wrote about it in our church newsletter. This Cambodian family had escaped the Khmer Rouge regime by fleeing to Vietnam. Eventually, they found their way to a resettlement camp in Indonesia. Our church agreed to help Pheng and Lang Ear, along with their six children, ages 2 to 15, resettle in the Vienna area. They came without food or clothes, housing or employment.

A house was rented and furnished for them to live. We

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enrolled them in the food stamp program, but the parents didn't like the idea of food stamps. They vowed to be off food stamps within the year and so they were!

We found Pheng a job as a goldsmith in a jewelry store. With a loan from the church, he opened a jewelry store in Arlington. The children quickly became proficient in English and enrolled in school. They became U.S. citizens.

This Buddhist family became active in our worship and Sunday school. They assumed, since our church had sponsored them, that they were automatically church members.

All six children graduated from high school and attended college. Two of them earned advanced degrees. One of them, Haidi, received her master's degree in Conservation Biology and Agricultural Development. When Haidi was an undergraduate student at William and Mary, she became active in a campus ministry. She became a Christian and was baptized here some years ago.

Here's the kicker: Haidi and her husband now serve with World Vision, a Christian relief agency, in Cambodia. The seeds of faith sown in Haidi's life are now reaping huge spiritual dividends. Our giving has come full circle.

Recently, I received a thank you letter from the Ear family with a generous check to support our ministry. I was deeply moved. They not only paid us back. They paid us forward so we can invest in more people like Haidi.

Our ministry of English for Speakers of other Languages (ESOL) was presented the Human Rights Award by Fairfax County recently. This ESOL ministry has grown to 330 students from 53 countries. It's now the size of an elementary school. Ministries like ESOL don't start large. They begin small and rather unassuming. They begin the size of a mustard seed, seeds sown in the lives of little girls like Haidi.

I have two recommendations for each of us. First, let God's seed in Jesus Christ fall into the fertile soil of your hearts. Second, sow seeds of faith everywhere. Remember: Small seeds can yield big results.

