

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
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“Mustard Seed Kingdom”

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If you had to choose a symbol to describe God’s Kingdom, would you select a tiny seed or a great tree?

I suspect many would choose a great tree. Grand trees symbolize nobility and endurance and strength. They provide life, nourishment, beauty and protection.

On a trip to help my Grandmother move to California many years ago we visited the California Redwoods, so monumental in size we could actually drive Grandma’s mid-sized sedan through the hole in the base of one tree.

On several trips to Biloxi, Mississippi, I recall the great Oak tree located downtown. Over the decades a courtyard with businesses has sprung up around this tree which is thought to be over 2000 years old. One immediately notices how the tree fosters life: people and squirrels and rabbits and birds and bugs and many other animals seek this tree for shelter.

Some days I think THAT is what I want God’s kingdom to be like. So powerful, so mighty, so strong, so armed and imposing that nothing harmful could ever penetrate it.

Living near South Shore Park in Milwaukee, I often walk by another grand tree. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources has designated it the largest European Copper Beech Tree in Wisconsin, measuring over 15 feet in circumference at the base with numerous large branches reaching up and out. Children climb and play in the tree, people picnic under it, the tree provides lots of fun and protection. In 2016 residents noticed an increase in dead leaves, they saw how the tree began to lose large limbs during storms. The tree was evaluated and the Milwaukee County Parks Supervisor reports the tree has exceeded it’s expected lifespan. Last I heard it has been determined the tree will need to come down someday soon.

So, then I began to wonder, If the grandest trees can fail and fall, is this such a good symbol for the eternal and everlasting Kingdom of God? Today in our parable we are presented with an alternative image... the mustard seed. It grows into a small bush just a few feet tall.

A few years ago our congregation hosted a Continuing Education event on behalf of the Wisconsin Council of Churches. United Church of Christ Theologian and artist, Dr. Charles McCollough led a program called “The Art of Parables.” In his book, Dr. McCollough challenges readers to find fresh insights in Jesus’ most commonly taught parables. In each chapter, Dr. McCollough uses a two-stage approach; first, he translates each parable artistically through his work as a sculptor. Then he uses the artwork to interpret each parable in its original context.

As we seek fresh insight from the Parable of the Mustard Seed I'd like to draw your attention to the screen where we will view two Sculptures created by Dr. McCollough which pertain to this parable.

In the first picture, on the left you will see a woman bent over to plant a seed, a symbol of hope for God's Empire. A man in the middle mocks her seemingly unfounded hope with laughter. And on the right, another person stands in worship of a great tree.

In the New Testament, large trees were often understood as symbols of powerful kingdoms. They represented the imperial might, military power, and dominance of the Roman empire. These were believed by many to be the most powerful forces in the ancient world.

Next, as we view the second picture. We see the tiny mustard seed has grown into a large bush able to shelter wildlife. The woman who planted the seed is singing with joy as the laughter of the mocker turns to dismay. The one worshipping the mighty tree is troubled to see its branches withered and dying. The artist says this person is finding out the hope of the military empire is not the same as God's hope. To drive this point home, we see birds are flocking to the mustard bush while the dying tree has only a vulture of death and despair.

We might put a twist on our opening question, how would Jesus choose to symbolize God's kingdom, a tiny seed or a great tree? Clearly, he has chosen the tiny seed. How would this be heard in his day?

Comparing God's kingdom to a mustard seed would have caught the immediate attention of Jesus' audience of rural peasants. The mustard seed was unwanted, illegal, a weed in ancient gardens. No responsible gardener would plant it near their garden because it would dominate as it spreads.

But before we jump to judgement, the ancient world also knew about the Mustard plants good qualities..., "When pounded with vinegar, mustard is applied to serpent bites and scorpion stings. It counteracts the poison of fungi. For phlegm, it is kept in the mouth until it melts, or used as a gargle. For a toothache, it is chewed. It is beneficial for stomach troubles. It cleared the senses and bowels."

As my new Testament Professor, Dr. Steve Patterson likes to say, "Now that is a useful plant. The empire of God may not be what we expected, but it is not without its qualities. It clears the head, penetrates the brain. It works against all poisonous foes. It restores your voice. Calms your troubled soul. Clears the senses and generally cleans you out."

To many of Jesus' listeners, the hope was for God's empire to be the mightiest ever... With better battle gear, better weapons, and better strategy. God's empire was to be greater than Egypt, or Babylon, or Rome.

But the prophets of the bible teach us God's empire is so unlike those empires that Jesus needed to use some shocking imagery to help people understand. God's empire of compassion, hope and courage was to be the opposite of the violent empires ruled by hate, hopelessness, and fear, those that live by dominating others.

God's empire is built on compassion and mutual cooperation with others. God's empire will not be symbolized by towering trees of pride and strutting arrogance, but by a tiny mustard seed of compassion, peace and justice.

Jesus used a mustard seed because he spoke about a realm that will agitate like a weed in the gardens of abusive power. He taught of an empire that will confront sin and evil with mercy and love, instead of domination and war. He taught of a kingdom where peace is the result of loving each other, not subduing each other. He taught of a kingdom which is powerful in a way that turned the laughter of mockers into dismay, and the worship of false idols into emptiness.

He taught of a kingdom that will not go away, or give up, or give in or quit, never, never, ever... No matter how difficult it is to make everyone feel welcome, no matter how much work it takes to love those who are different from us, no matter how hard it is to help every living creature become truly and fully who God has made them to be ... He taught of an empire built, not on the temporary power of might, but instead, on the everlasting power of love and relationship.

Amen