

Mustard Trees – Sermon July 25th & 26th – Mark Knauss

A Parable casts one thing alongside something else. In that setting, a reinterpretation can occur. Jesus has several parables here in today's Gospel to illustrate what God's Kingdom is like and I am going to focus on the one about the mustard seed. **[SLIDE of a mustard seed]**. In Matthew 13: 31-32, Jesus says, **[SLIDE "...The Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32it 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."]**

The mustard seed is ridiculously small **[SLIDE of a hand holding a mustard seed]** and has the potential to germinate rapidly once it hits the ground. I imagine when a seed this tiny falls to the ground, it is nearly impossible to find it in the dirt. It becomes practically invisible once it touches the soil, but immediately begins the process of growing.

Science and medicine have revealed to the world a mountain of life and activity that happens on a microscopic level. That is a peculiarity about the natural world we live in. So much happens beyond what is visible to our eyes. Some of it is good. For example, the replication of genes and cells is necessary for life. Some of it is not so good – like viruses that spread through the air and cause disease and sickness when they find a home in animals or plants.

The Kingdom of heaven has this invisible quality of growth to it. It is not so visible when it lands and begins to germinate in the hearts of humanity. Regardless, once it touches the fertile soil of our souls, it begins to grow. This is the power of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives

and the world. Though we cannot always see it, it is present and sent into creation by God – for our good and the good of the world.

Mustard plants typically grow into the size of a bush. **[SLIDE – Picture of a mustard bush]**. Jesus exaggerates the natural order of things when he tells the story of a mustard plant that grows into a tree. This defies the natural order of things that his hearers were used to.

We live in a time of exaggerated stories. So many tales we read of on the internet take some small piece of information and blow it out of proportion. The truth is often exaggerated and twisted – spun to make us believe something negative. We are challenged to decide what the truth is.

These exaggerated internet tales can manipulate our emotions. As a result, we may feel fearful, angry, alone, deceived, or taken advantage of. When I think of these harmful and self-destructive emotions, I think of the evil the devil continually sows into our world. The devil wants to exaggerate things and leave us feeling hopeless. Martin Luther has a lot to say about the devil, and we read this in his Catechism, where Luther talks about the Lord's Prayer.

When we pray, “And lead us not into temptation.” Martin Luther identifies this as the Sixth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, and he explains it this way:

[SLIDE – “God tempts no one to sin, but we ask in this prayer that God would watch over us and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful self may not deceive us and draw us into false belief, despair, and other great and shameful sins. And we pray that even though we are so tempted we may still win the final victory.” Small Catechism by Martin Luther]

God calls us to be faithful people who do not fall into despair. The devil wants us to believe that there is no hope and all is lost. We pray in the Lord's prayer that we may not be deceived and that God's truth and justice will prevail. We pray for God to "deliver us from evil," and that God's Kingdom will come.

Jesus exaggerates reality when he tells us of a mustard seed that grows into a tree **[SLIDE – of a tree]** but he is trying to show us what God's Kingdom is like. The Kingdom grows beyond our control because God ordains it to. Nature restricts the mustard plant to a specific size, height, and strength. In Jesus' parable, God grows it into a mustard tree, with a height, width, depth, and strength of limbs that the world has never known. God's Kingdom works within and outside of the natural order of things. We are called to trust the power and will of God.

But that's not all. Jesus has more to say about God's Kingdom in this parable. This mustard tree becomes a haven for birds. **[SLIDE – birds in a tree]** It is a place where birds can live, find shelter, and make their nests. The tree is high enough to provide safety. It is strong enough to ride out the storms and protect the nests of the creatures living in it. That sounds a lot like hospitality to me.

Hospitality is the relationship between the host and the guest. We are the guests or the birds. God and the Kingdom is the host or the tree. The same Kingdom (or tree) that you and I share comes from our God, who provides hospitality for all. God's power and glory is displayed in the hospitality of the Kingdom. We are called to share God's Kingdom and hospitality with the world.

The hospitality of God always sounds beautiful in a sermon but gets challenged when we try to bring it into reality. We are challenged with providing hospitality to all. We all have visions of what generosity looks like, and when we think enough has been given. Maybe we fear that some may take advantage of God or us? But who are we to put limits on the kindness and generosity that God freely offers to the world? We are called to be the conduit of hospitality into the Kingdom, and Jesus models that for us.

[SLIDE of the wheat and weeds]. Though the Bible speaks about those who reject God's hospitality, we are not called to 'decide' who are or are not the recipients of God's generosity and love. Remember from last week that God will decide who are the wheat and who are the weeds in the end. We are not called to pull what we believe are the weeds.

In the Lord's Prayer we pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Martin Luther writes,

[SLIDE "God's will is done when He hinders and defeats every evil scheme and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful self, which would prevent us from keeping His name Holy and would oppose the coming of His kingdom." Martin Luther's Small Catechism]

God's Kingdom is like a mustard seed that defies what the world tells it to be and grows into a big old tree. **[SLIDE of a Tree]**. The power of God does that. It defies the limits and boundaries that exist in the world. It certainly challenges the boundaries and limits that humanity tries to establish.

God's Kingdom is like a small mustard seed that is hard to see. It is even more difficult to hold onto because it can slip between our fingers and fall to the ground. Once it touches the dirt, forget it. It germinates quickly because of the abundant rain that God pours over all

creation. It grows because God's power is at work beyond what we can see with our own eyes. As you go about your week, pay attention to what you are feeling. Know that under the branches of God's Kingdom...

Where the devil sows fear – God sows trust.

Where the devil sows scarcity – God sows abundance.

Where the devil sows anxiety and worry – God sows security and comfort.

Where the devil sows unfriendliness and rejection – God sows hospitality.

Where the devil sows hate – God sows love.

God's Kingdom is a tree for all of humanity.

Let us Pray: "God, you have revealed your power and will for this world through Jesus Christ. You send your Holy Spirit for us to be empowered to bring your Kingdom to fruition. Like the mustard tree, work through us to grow your Kingdom beyond the limitations of this world. Help us to sow trust, abundance, security, comfort, and hospitality. We pray that we might sow love. The love you sow into the world feeds all of creation, grows your Kingdom, and binds us to you forever. AMEN"