

## *“The Mustard Seed”*

*Jeremiah 1:4-10; Matthew 13:31-33*

August 21, 2022

As I look back over my life, I have had dealings with several groups of twins. From grade school even into my adult life, I have known well either one or both members of a set of twins. For the most part, they're just like you or me with the exception of a known doppelganger when it comes to identical twins. What's been funny to note in all my dealings with twins is how similar, or dissimilar twins can be at any given time. Of course, there are identical twins which look exactly like one another and fraternal twins, twins that aren't spitting images of the other.

The reason I open with reflecting on twins a bit is that this morning we're going to look at twin parables. Well, these aren't so much parables although they're considered such as they are extended analogies. That is to say that there's no story in this particular set of parables, like there has been with the parable of the sower or the parable of the prodigal son, for example. But these extended analogies do a lot to advance our understanding of the Kingdom of God. That's an important thing to us and we shouldn't miss the immediacy with which we talk about the Kingdom. Some of us may wrongly assume that the Kingdom of God exists somewhere off over the horizon, in some far-off time which we likely won't see while we're alive. For lack of better words, they think of the Kingdom as heaven, which it will be, but that necessarily omits the immediacy that the Kingdom presents itself here and now. That's the fullness of the Kingdom but the declaration the Bible makes is that the Kingdom arrived in the person of Jesus Christ and is now here, albeit in a small and growing fashion. Jesus Christ brought the Kingdom, in a way, IS the kingdom and it is here with us by the power of the Holy Spirit.

This isn't the only time the Bible uses multiple parables in order to extend a point. There are the parables of the treasure and the pearl which we did in one of the early weeks in this series on the parables. Those are another example of stacking parables which help illuminate something deep for us. In the old testament, we see something similar in the dreams of the cupbearer and beadmaker dealing with fat and skinny cows. That is to say that this is a Biblical convention, stacking short stories or analogies to help fully develop points that are being made. In order to fully understand these parables intent, it helps to look backwards in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Matthew and locate the parables within the original material.

The chapter opens with the parable of the sower. We talked about that particular parable a few weeks ago so I'll assume that it's fresh in your mind. There, we talked about how the seed is sowed but the growth depends on the soil type. Remember, we talked about what your soil type may presently be? If you're really living for Jesus, it might be the best soil ever but if you're distracted by the cares of the world, the Word may not be so fruitful. But think about that particular parable. Only one in four is going to understand what Jesus is talking about according to the parable.

The next thing that's talked about in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Matthew is the parable of the weeds and the tares. I haven't done that one nor, considering this is the final week I'll be in the parables, is it likely that I'll do so in this go-round. But in that parable, what Jesus tells us is that right alongside the wheat, Satan has come and planted weeds. But, interestingly, we ourselves are not to pull up the weeds, lest we accidentally get some wheat by mistake. That God will sort out the wheat from the chaff in the end of days, that's what we're told. And while both of these parables make some positive points, they also can be kind of depressing. After all, no matter what, only 25% are going to get it. Further, that amid the growing wheat will be weeds and we are not supposed to mess with them. Taken negatively, these parables suggest hard and oftentimes fruitless work ahead for the disciples of Jesus Christ. I guess a .250 average is okay in baseball but generally not what we're shooting for on a success percentage. Neither is it particularly invigorating to know that, on occasions, we will be hampered in our progress by those meddlesome weeds.

So, Jesus tells these next parables and they're meant to be comforting in light of the present circumstances. The first of our "twin" analogies reads like this – *“He put another parable before them, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.’”* While technically not the world's smallest seed, the mustard seed would've been the smallest seed known in the ancient near east at the time. How small are mustard seeds? Well, it takes

about 21,000 mustard seeds to weigh just one ounce, that's how small they are. But why is Jesus talking about mustard seeds.

Well, imagine now, Jesus is standing out talking to a small, gathered group of disciples. Imagine how small they must have felt against so many obstacles. After all, Jesus was talking about the Kingdom of God but it sure didn't look that way in the present frame. There were a handful of them and the obstacles to their hopes dreams and aspirations were huge. Jesus is talking about this expansive, wonderful thing but, presently, there would've seemed little hope of that coming true. What Jesus is striving to let the gathered disciples and us know is that the Kingdom starts small. That seems odd, doesn't it? After all, when we think of God, we think of something so large that our minds can't even contain Him and all of His power, goodness and might. Is there anything bigger than God, after all? And I think when our philosophical brains get through with that esoteric query, we'll all agree – If God is, God must be big.

But here, Jesus tells us the opposite. That the Kingdom of God is going to start small. And I think that makes sense to us. How did the Kingdom come alive in your heart? Did it arrive with fanfare and a loud brass band or was in something smaller, something quieter, something intimate? But however it came, it came.

Was your faith huge in the beginning? Probably not if you're honest about it. You don't ask the new converts to go to Africa after all. That comes with time. In the beginning of faith, you're just hopeful to see someone at church every Sunday. That is to say that one does not expect amazing deeds of faith to come from the newly converted. It takes time and it takes effort for faith to fully mature.

In a similar way, that's what Jesus is talking about when it comes to the Kingdom. The kingdom begins as something as small as a mustard seed which take 21,000 to make an ounce. This miniscule thing is so easy to overlook that it may just fly away in the breeze. But, as Jesus goes on, we see that that is just the beginning.

Because the intent of the parable is to see the dynamic. What begins as something really, really small is got potential. Potential for great growth. What Jesus tells us is that this tiny seed will grow and soon be the largest of all the bushes in the garden. That what became small will, in time, be so large as to provide shelter for the birds of the air. You know, it is interesting. I was unaware that mustard seeds grew into trees until this very morning. Or, as the meme goes, I was 50 years old when I discovered that a mustard seed grows into a tree. Somehow, I thought it was more like a bush but no! When I googled it this morning just to have a fresh image in my mind for preaching, I was stunned to see pictures of these large, upright trees. So just think, this small little seed, this insignificant thing, well, it's got potential, doesn't it? Potential for the greatest growth.

And that's what Jesus is telling His disciples and us. That while the Kingdom starts out small, it is going to grow large. That what may seem insignificant is going to amaze. I can't help but take courage in that declaration. Right now, our church seems rather small but the potential she holds remains amazing. Why? You people!!!! While we are small in number, we are great in faith! We may be a small church presently, but, with the right nurture and care, this small church has the potential, like a mustard seed to grow large.

What will it take? Well, the Holy Spirit to begin with. And, in particular, it will take the Holy Spirit stirring in the hearts and minds of our members. If you want to see this church grow, then make a point of growing your faith. How do you do that? Oh, there are as many ways to do that as there are mustard seeds in an ounce. You can take up reading Scripture more regularly, you can amplify your prayer life, you can go on a mission trip, there are literally an endless number of things you can do. But each one of them will see you walking much more closely with Jesus Christ. So, the point of the first parable is that what seems small at first will grow so large as to provide for a great number. And isn't that a comforting awareness. That as the church grows, it will become sanctuary for more and more people. More and more folks will come to know peace as the church continues to grow as a manifestation of the kingdom of God.

The second of our fraternal twin parables goes like this – *“He told them another parable. ‘The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.’”*

Whenever I think about leavened bread, I can't help but recollect something that happened to me in culinary school. I was in baking class with George Schmaren, a man you know of, even if you don't know him. George created the original Bojangles' biscuit formula, he didn't call it a recipe but a formula like the true culinary chemist he was. Well, we were in old George's class as we were learning all about the different types of yeast. Let's just say in one batch, we got our measurements wrong and used about 10 times the amount of yeast we were supposed to have. We noticed it in the rise, it never made it into the oven as in the bowl it blew up to

incredible size that we knew it was wrong. If we'd put it into the oven, it would've been like that old I Love Lucy episode where she does something similar.

Now leaven is an interesting image in the Bible as it gets used in both a positive and negative fashion. At some points, we need to beware the leaven but here, in this parable, leavening takes a positive spin. The Bible does this with a couple of images. Jesus is called a lion, but so is Satan in the Scriptures. So too is leaven used positively and negatively in the Word. The intent here is clearly positive as the Kingdom is already mixed in. That is to say that it is there, just waiting to be revealed. And that's what it teaches us. That God's Kingdom is hidden at first.

And that's true for us, isn't it? It is for me. If you had told me 30 years ago that I would end up being a pastor, wearing robes and preaching on Sunday morning, I can tell you what I would've done. LAUGHED. You clearly didn't know me. But God did. Knew what was implanted in me without my knowledge. That is to say faith itself can remain hidden. You might not think you have the greatest faith in the world but then, calamity comes, and you're surprised by how much faith you actually have. You see, it was there, hidden from you and first but already mixed in.

And to return to our relating of this church to these particular parables, I can't help but note that our members are already mixed into life on Charlotte's Westside. I know that many of you participate in sports leagues and daycares and car clubs and hunting groups. That is to say, that our members are distributed into the life of Charlotte like yeast in dough. And that means we have the potential for amazing growth. Growth like a weed is possible for us, really. Why? Because like yeast, we spread. That's right. As your faith comes more and more alive, you'll find yourself crying out Jesus from the rooftops of your life and that will have an effect. People will hear you and wonder what exactly in Sam Hill has happened to you.

The parable of the yeast is a very simple illustration of the Kingdom. A small amount of yeast works its way through the whole batch of dough. In the same way, God's kingdom remains hidden at first but it will eventually spread through all the world.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.