

The Kingdom of Heaven is Like ... Mustard Seed

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Does anyone remember the show, “Kids Say the Darndest Things!”? I used to watch it as a kid, and quite honestly, didn’t find it that entertaining at the time. But when I watched the re-runs later in adulthood, I found some episodes to be quite hilarious and eye-opening. On one of his shows, Art Linkletter asked the kids to describe heaven for him. Here are a few of the responses:

Annalee – age 11 – Heaven is beautiful with no hurt or talking about people and no drugs. It is all good... Kids are laughing and praying with Jesus. You get everything you want, and you have beautiful voices to sing for God’s glory. Sunflowers are everywhere ... And it smells heavenly too!

Benjamin – age 10 – Heaven is a place where you can just have fun. It’s a place where you can see your friends again. I’ll be happy. I’ll be able to put unpleasant times, bad days, seizure medicine – all that stuff, behind me!

Isaac – age 11 – Heaven will be like living in the clouds with Christ and you can roller blade on streets of gold. Peter will give you fishing lessons. We’ll be able to fly. We’ll play tag in the sky... My point is, heaven is going to be wonderful.

Well these quotes speak of the place we call heaven ... and I think they capture the unsurpassed beauty and wonder of that place pretty well. I don’t know about you, but I’m definitely looking forward to flying and playing tag in the sky, and leaving all the hurt and sorrow of life on earth behind.

Heaven is every believer’s true and final home. But we don’t have to wait for death to come to experience the Kingdom of Heaven within. It is intended to be our experience here and now too.

Jesus taught His disciples to pray, “Your Kingdom come, Your will be done on earth, as it is in Heaven.” (Matthew 6:10) Clearly, in those words He highlighted the truth that God’s Kingdom, the kingdom of heaven, is ours to enjoy and experience not just as our future home, but as our everyday reality.

We come to understand and experience the kingdom of heaven on earth when we are filled with a deep awareness of God's presence with us and in us, and when, out of that unending sense of His presence, we find our will aligning with and choosing to do His will. That is the kingdom of heaven come to earth ... the kingdom of heaven come to us.

The Church regularly celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit to God's people. In Him, the Spirit, we know God's presence in us and with us ... always. And, in Him, we are enabled, enlightened and empowered to do God's will ... to partner with God so that His Kingdom can come to earth. The Church is intended to be the full representation of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Not the building/s, but the people ... the people who have received God's gift of salvation and restoration, and have been filled with the Holy Spirit. As we each enjoy His presence and seek to do His will in our world, the Church both experiences the Kingdom of Heaven on earth and offers it to this broken world.

While He was still on earth, Jesus offered some word pictures to help explain the kingdom of heaven. Over three Sundays we are going to explore some of these parables together. Today, our focus will be on the parable of the growing mustard seed which is found in Matthew 13:31-32. The New Living Translation renders it this way:

"Here is another illustration Jesus used: The Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed planted in a field. It is the smallest of all seeds but it becomes the largest of garden plants. It grows into a tree and birds come and make nests in its branches."

A mustard seed truly is tiny. Jesus wasn't exaggerating when he described it as the "smallest of all seeds". I haven't tried, but I think I'd actually have had a hard time picking one up ... they're that small! In another well-known parable, Jesus spoke of having faith like a mustard seed, faith that could move mountains; in making that statement He was emphasizing the impact of even the "smallest" amount of faith, with the mustard seed being the picture used!

Well, in this Matthew 13 parable it isn't so much the size of the seed that is stressed, as the size of the plant that it becomes. He speaks of it becoming the "largest of garden plants"; "a tree", in fact. But here's the thing, mustard plants aren't actually very large; most grow between

waist and shoulder height only. So, while Jesus wasn't exaggerating about the size of the seed, He was definitely exaggerating about the size of the plant that it would become. He employs some extreme hyperbole here ... and obviously, He does so to make a point!

Jesus is talking about unusual, supernatural growth! And that would not have been missed by His earliest hearers, as they would have been quite familiar with the mustard plant. The mustard plant described as a tree would immediately have been seen as an anomaly, a rarity, something most definitely out of the ordinary! And those early hearers would have been wondering what lesson this unusually large mustard tree was intended to teach them.

We too should be asking that question: What is the lesson of this mustard seed that becomes a huge mustard tree? And how exactly does it capture the Kingdom of Heaven on earth?

As we already shared, the Kingdom of Heaven on earth is our sense of God's presence with us and in us, and our desire to align our will to His so that we are consistently doing His will. Most often, the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven to us has a small beginning. Our ability to perceive and understand God's presence and His will is limited at the start. The 'spiritual' realities of our walk with God are new, uncertain, often beyond our comprehension in the beginning. Do you remember those early days? For me, they involved a lot of 'baby steps' of faith!

Over time, though, just like a seed transforming into a mature plant, our sense of God's presence and our desire and ability to do His will grows in us ... or at least it is intended to. And according to Jesus' parable, its growth is intended to greatly exceed all normal expectations! That small seed of faith, that can seem quite inconsequential in the early days of our walk with God, becomes vast, it becomes great! As God works quietly beneath the surface, cultivating the field of our life, He brings steady growth; He moves us toward life abundant. Mediocrity is never His aim; super-abundance is! Like the mustard seed that becomes a great tree, our small beginnings in faith are intended to become glorious expressions of God's Kingdom on earth!

Are you experiencing that? Have you seen God cause that kind of growth in you? Are you still seeing that continual, exponential growth?

I'm sure some reading this sermon are still near the start of this spiritual journey. You are experiencing heaven on earth, but in small doses still. It feels wonderful. It amazes. But, in your hearts you know that there is still so much more to come ... more to learn, more to experience, more to embrace. Growth in faith is progressive, as is the experience of the Kingdom of Heaven within. Like that small seed that had to first be buried in the soil, in time you sprout roots, and then a sturdy branch that becomes a trunk, and then other branches with an abundance of leaves and flowers, and that growth is experienced anew season after season. Jesus' words today, for those new to this journey are these, "Take heart! Don't be discouraged with your progress. Rejoice in knowing that little by little, I am making all things new. I am changing you into a true reflection of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth! You are growing and you will continue to grow as you daily put your faith and trust in Me."

Of course, many reading this sermon will have been on the journey for many years. Hopefully you're aware of His nearness at all times and your deepest desire is to do His will (though you may not always achieve that as consistently as you'd like!). Hopefully you, like the vast mustard tree described by Jesus, are making the glorious Kingdom of Heaven visible on earth! Jesus' words to the mature believer are these, "Live out your full-grown faith! Don't settle for less than a full experience of My abiding presence. Choose My will so that you can know the abundant life I have given you! Keep on growing! Keep on reaching!"

For those that see themselves somewhere in between on that growth continuum ... maybe as the 'normal', waist-high mustard plant ... I hope you realize that there is still room for growth; lots of growth, in fact. Jesus' words for you are these, "Don't ever be satisfied with the growth you have already attained. Remember that I want to grant you supernatural growth and deep maturity of faith. Rejoice in the transformation I have brought and live it boldly, but continually pursue more of Me so that you can continue to grow."

For all of us, as mustard seeds in the process of growing, we need to remember that the growth of God's Kingdom in us is His Work, not ours. And since He is the Master Gardener, we can count on His work being miraculous and the growth He brings being abundant. We should never expect or settle for anything less!

Though it is God's Work, we do have a part to play. Just like that mustard seed we have to be willing to be buried in Christ; which means dying to self daily. And we have to be open to receiving and making full use of the growth gifts that He offers us: the Word (the Bible), the Holy Spirit (especially His convicting and counseling ministry), and the Church (particularly, its teaching and guidance and support). We have to choose daily to be nourished by The Living Water, which is Christ, because plants can't grow without it! And we have to strive towards The Light that is Christ, as well! As we do these things, the growth of God's Kingdom in us will continue ... slowly, and steadily! Are you constantly pursuing that growth?

Well, there is one final lesson from the parable of the small mustard seed that becomes a huge tree, and it is this: This supernatural growth that God makes available to His Church is not given for our benefit alone. It is, in truth, given for the many outside of God's Kingdom who still need to find "home". The parable ends with the vast tree that grew from that small mustard seed becoming a home for the birds that "come and make nests in its branches". It's a beautiful picture really; and a cogent reminder of the truth that we are here for OTHERS always. There are so many within our world who are desperately seeking "home" ... a place of safety, a place to belong, a place that offers family! The Kingdom of Heaven is in us so that the Church can be that place of safety and sanctuary for:

- the single moms and dads, who are giving their all, day-in and day-out, and struggling with exhaustion
- the seniors who are isolated and alone so much of the time
- the new immigrants, who are working hard to adjust to a different culture and a new language, and just trying to 'fit in'
- the young adults, who are deeply discouraged because they can't find work, though they've studied hard, gotten their degrees, and are pounding the pavement every day
- the empty nesters who don't know what to do with themselves now that the kids have left home

- the working parents, who are putting in 50 hour work-weeks so that the bills can be paid, but desperately missing time with their children
- I could go on and on about those outside of the Kingdom who are searching for “home”

Every community is filled with people who are on a quest for sanctuary and serenity.

The Kingdom of Heaven ... that sense of God’s abiding presence, that knowledge of His will and His purposes ... is what they need. Are they seeing it in us? Are they drawn to God’s Kingdom as they see the gloriousness of our experience of that Kingdom within?

The Kingdom of Heaven is in each one of us to bless us ... and what a blessing it is; but the Kingdom of Heaven is also in us so that others, through relationship with us, can come to discover its wonder too! Let’s make sure our experience of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth is flourishing, as God wants it to be, so that many others will be drawn into its Light and its Love through us! After all, there’s sanctuary enough in His Kingdom for all “the whosoever”!