

Matthew 13: 31-32

<sup>31</sup> He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; <sup>32</sup> it 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.”

**Trinity Presbyterian Church**  
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**“Lessons in Green: Mustard Seed”**

How many times have we heard the parable? We know about the tiny seed. We know about its great growth; about the birds who nest in its branches. How many sermons have we heard exhorting the church to plant their tiny efforts in the soil and watch as it germinates with kingdom fecundity? The parable is as elementary as kindergarten arithmetic. Plant the tiniest of seeds and the kingdom will grow bigger than our wildest imagination.

As we start, we admit the teaching is compelling. Plant a little seed and presto, watch the kingdom spread. The parable is like a fertilizer for our confidence. Plant a little gospel encouragement and watch the seed take root in someone’s life. Do a small deed, and it might change the trajectory of someone’s day. Plant a small seed at 1416 Bolton Street and wait for the promised church growth. After all, God has made great things out of smallness before. Remember Jacob in the Old Testament? He was smaller than his twin brother Esau. While big Esau was out hunting that night’s dinner, Jacob was assisting mother in the kitchen. Still, God plants the entire house of Israel in the soil of the smaller brother’s story. Then of course there’s King David—the runt of the litter. Remember how David’s father marched seven of his thoroughbred sons past the prophet Samuel. “How about the tall, dark and handsome one, God?” Samuel asks.

But God says, “Nope, not him.”

“Well, how about the six foot, six inch son with broad shoulders? He’d make a fine-looking king.”

But God says, “no again.”

After seven times, Samuel asks, “Well, who then?”

“I’ll take that scrawny ruddy looking boy who is out shepherding the hills.”

“Him!? But God, the kid is so wimpy that when he tries to flex a muscle it looks like a twig twitching in the breeze.”

“He’s my choice,” says God. “I choose the small one.”

Well, on that scrawny little child grew a kingdom like no other. We get the message. Out of small seeds come great things. As confusing as parables usually are, this one is a slam dunk. The

kingdom of heaven is like a tiny seed that grows larger than what we ever expected. Done. Thank you for the confidence, Jesus. Amen. Maybe now we can all get home before the football game begins.

But hold on just a minute. Let's take a second look at the parable. "The kingdom is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of seeds. But when it grows up it becomes the greatest of shrubs. Then it becomes a tree so large that the birds build their nests in its branches." Just for kicks let's fact check Jesus here. The kingdom is like a mustard seed. Well, that one's a freebie, but let's keep going. The kingdom is like a mustard seed which is the smallest of seeds. True or false? If you thought "true" you'd be wrong. Mustard seeds are small, but not the smallest of seeds. True or false: the kingdom is like a mustard seed that grows into the greatest of shrubs? False again. In the Middle East, mustard grows tall, but it doesn't quite classify as the greatest of shrubs. Let's try again. True or false: a mustard seed does NOT grow into a great shrub, but becomes a tree? "X." Jesus is zero for three so far. Good thing we are fact checking. Final question—for the bonus round—a mustard seed grows large enough for birds to build their nests in its branches? Answer: highly unlikely. Either Jesus is not a literalist or he does not know much about mustard seeds! Take a look at the parable again. Every statement Jesus makes is a falsified exaggeration.

So wonder: what is Jesus doing? Perhaps it is helpful to know that a mustard seed is a weed! Jesus does not hand us a flattering image of a triumphal kingdom, but of a weed infested one! Now what do we know about weeds? They germinate, spread, surprise us and they grow even though they are undesired. But notice: the weed grows into a refuge—a home—for God's good creation. There is a rural church in a small town in South Carolina. They decided they were going to open their doors to housing Syrian refugees even though the locals didn't want them there. To them the church looks like a weed. But the church said, "We will care for them, bring them to us." You know who that sounds like, don't you? It sounds like Jesus. With the children that the disciples wanted to shoo away. Jesus says, "Bring them to me." To the blind beggar screaming for mercy, as the disciples yell, "Oh, be quiet!" Jesus says, "No, bring him to me." It's the refrain of the kingdom. Perhaps the kingdom of God is like a weed because it resiliently wraps itself around those deemed not embraceable. And it provides the vulnerable of our world a home, because there is no such thing as a person who is too small, or too unworthy, or too broken for God's kingdom.

So do you know what happens when we open our lives to the poor? We grow. Our faith grows. Our hearts break and then they grow. Our understanding of who God is grows. In the waiting room of Crisis Control Ministries, there is a prayer box. As guests wait for assistance, they are invited to write down their prayers, place them in the box and then for the staff's devotion they read the prayers out loud one at a time. So for our session's devotion last month, Margaret

Elliot asked us to read some of their prayers out loud to each other:

“Please pray that my disability gets started soon, so I can take care of my family.”

“We are a family of four living out of our car. Pray that God turns things around.”

“I am a single mother who is unable to feed my children. Please God, help me.”

You know, every one of those prayers was like a tiny seed that wiggled its way into our broken hearts. For a moment, maybe longer, it awoke us to the reality of our neighbors who are living in the weeds. More, it reminded us of our calling as a church: to be in relationship with the poor and to keep growing.

Now, I know it is often impractical, but I also know there is a seed of compassion inside of us praying, “Lord, bring them to us!”

And I know that we are a small church with limited resources and busy lives, planted in a world with huge problems, but still I know the seed of the kingdom is growing within us praying,

“Lord, bring them to us!”

And good people, I know we may even be asked to carry the cross and release the comfort we so desperately cling to, but still the trembling voice of the church keeps resiliently praying, Lord...

...you know, I don't think I can finish the words. Would you say them with me?

Lord... [bring them to us...]