

Sermon
27 July 2014
West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

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Text: Matthew 13:31-35

Expectations... If I say: "One day, long long ago..." you expect to hear a story, right? If I say: "We are gathered here together..." you expect to listen to a wedding ceremony, am I right? I would never start a wedding ceremony with the words: "One day, long long ago..." or say the words "We are gathered here together..." and then continue to tell the story of the 3 little pigs, would I? No, because that just wouldn't make any sense at all.

Certain introductory words make us expect certain things.

And this was also true in Biblical times. If Jesus said: "There once was a man", or "there once was a king", or "there once was farmer", people expected to hear a parable. And the same goes for when Jesus said: "The kingdom of heaven is like..." Then the people also expected to hear a parable, this time just a parable about the kingdom of heaven.

But what is a parable? A parable is like a metaphor. It's a wee story, containing ordinary, everyday images, things that people would very

easily understand, to describe things that are *not* that easy to understand. And in this way a difficult concept is made understandable.

And “the kingdom of heaven” was, and still is, one such difficult concept. But by means of using a parable, Jesus would explain it in such a way that this concept would all of a sudden make sense to his listeners.

So when the people who gathered around Jesus every day listened to a parable, they *expected* to understand Jesus’ message to them a little better.

But because we live so many years after them, and we have a different culture, and we speak a different language, these parables don’t always straight away make sense to *us*.

It’s like when someone, shortly after we arrived in Scotland for the 1st time, said to me “*lang may yer lum reek!*” You are laughing at this because you know exactly what it means, because it’s a Scottish expression; but I went: “*whaaaat?!*” Now, however, I know what it means! I know that literally translated it says: “long may your chimney smoke”, which actually means “may you live long and well”. But then – I didn’t need to explain that to you, did I? You know what it means, because it’s a Scottish expression and you are all Scottish.

Just like that, the crowds gathered around Jesus knew straight away what he meant, while we sometimes need some of the images and metaphors he used explained to us before it will make sense.

And now some of you are probably thinking: “What is she going on about?” Because the parable we read this morning is probably one of the most straight forward and easy to understand parables in the New Testament!

But is it really? What does the parable about the mustard seed and the yeast mean?

Let me explain this by teaching you a South African expression! It translates something like: “The smaller the bottle the bigger the poison”. Which means of course, that if poison is strong you only need a wee drop to have a huge effect. Which in turn means you don’t have to be a big strong important person to have an effect on the people around you, sometimes small or unimportant people can have an even bigger effect if they act cleverly.

And at 1st glance that is exactly what this parable means.

The mustard seed is a very small seed. But then, when it grows, it becomes a huge tree. You would never expect such a small seed to become such a big tree, but surprisingly, it does! In other words, sometimes you only have to say or do a small thing to make the word of God grow big in someone else’s life.

Yeast changes a small amount of dough into a huge amount of dough. It makes it grow, changes its shape completely. Meaning: we Christians should be like that – the effect of our words and deeds should let other people turn to God too, and the result of this will be that the kingdom of God will grow bigger and bigger.

That's what it means, right?

Well, not quite. Or at least, that *is* what it means, but that's not the whole story. It also means more. And people, who lived in Palestine, in the 1st century, would know that straight away.

The first readers of Matthew's gospel were Jews who started believing in Jesus. Jews had millions of purity rules to adhere to. In Leviticus 19:19, for instance, we read: "Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed".

They were not allowed to plant 2 different kinds of seed in their field, because that would make them ritually unclean. And they didn't ever wanted to become ritually unclean, because that would mean that they weren't allowed into the temple. And if you couldn't go into the temple, well, then you couldn't speak to God.

So *no* Jew would plant a mustard seed in his field. Because it was against the law of purity.

And now Jesus – a Jew himself – says that the kingdom of God is like a man who planted a mustard seed in his field. And this very small seed became a huge tree.

In other words: Jesus is saying that no law excludes anybody from his kingdom. Those people who were regarded as ritually unclean by their fellow-Jews, they were welcome in his kingdom. And through them, he would spread his word.

Jesus was trying to tell the people that in the kingdom of God purity rules are not important. The rules of society, about who is in and who is out, don't apply with God. It's not only the people who think that they are perfect who are welcome in his kingdom – there is room for everybody. It's what's in your heart that counts, not what the rest of society thinks of you.

The same thing is true about the yeast. In Leviticus 2:11 we read that "...every grain offering you bring to the Lord must be made without yeast..." The Jews were the people who ate unleavened bread, remember? But now Jesus says: Put in that yeast and allow it to work its way through all the dough – so once again, the marginalized, the outcasts of society, the impure and ritually unclean people, those who were not allowed within the temple doors, they were the ones Jesus invited into his kingdom.

So these parables do mean that a something small can make a huge difference, but they *also* mean that God has different rules than the ones we apply to ourselves. He doesn't ever exclude anybody from his kingdom – every single one of us and of the people in the streets outside are welcome in his presence.

And if God includes everybody, who are we to ever exclude anybody?

Everybody is welcome in God's kingdom. Even those people who feel that they don't have enough faith, that they aren't worthy of being called Christians, even those who have failed and disappointed and made huge mistakes, every single one of them, *of us*, are welcome in God's arms.

By means of this parable God says: “I don’t care what the rest of the world thinks – I want to plant *you*, Mr./Miss./Mrs. Mustard Seed, right here in the middle of my field, so you can surprise everybody and become a huge big tree, so big that my birds can make their nests in your branches.

That’s easy to understand, isn’t it?

So don’t ever feel as if you are too small or insignificant for God to use – because he has a plan for you. He wants us, all of us, to be the yeast – to change the shape of this world we live in, so it can become more and more like his kingdom.

And how do we do that? Once again – we don’t have to be able to move the earth if we allow God to work through us. All it takes is one small gesture – an encouraging smile can make a shy and lonely person open up to you; a wee gesture of kindness can give someone who’s lost all faith in humankind hope for the future again. A *few words* as small and simple as “I’m sorry” or “I forgive you” can turn someone else’s life around completely. And your life too.

Only a few drops of food colouring changes the colour of the water *forever*, a tiny wee mustard seed becomes a huge big tree, a little yeast makes dough grow bigger and bigger, until it changes shape completely.

Don’t ever think that you are too small or insignificant to make a difference.

Be that mustard seed – go plant yourself right in the middle of one of the perfect little crops in the world out there – and let me tell you a secret – before you wipe out your eyes there will be a whole orchard of mustard trees around you!

So pick up the phone, open the door, make your peace, stretch out your hand... *and grow* – because that is what God intended for you. That is what God *expects* of you. God didn't make seeds for decoration – he made seeds to become trees.

May you grow in faith and hope and love, may your branches stretch so far and wide that you will be able to give shelter to the tired and weary...
May you become what God intended you to be.

Amen