

Mustard Seed Ministry
Matthew 13:31-32
9/6/09

It's time to rethink how we understand our lives, our faith, and the church—planting the small seeds of God's love is the key to transforming our community.

Some of the best moments I experience are the ones that are unexpected. So are some of my conversations. God likes to work in the unexpected, did you ever notice that?

I was talking with someone this week about all kinds of topics and we got onto sin and evil and why all this exists. We heard about that this past four weeks in the sermons—adversity comes our way for all of us. No one is exempt. Bad things happen. Life can be tough.

“Why doesn't God just fix it and make it all better?” I asked.

“Isn't that what we are called to be a part of with God?” the person responded.

Good answer.

Except, who am I, this little person in this world, to make such a difference? My contribution is pretty small when I look at the vast needs and problems.

And then I read these words from Jesus. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. The kingdom of heaven: infinite, powerful, mysterious, beautiful. Mustard seed.

God works in the unexpected, small beginnings.

These children we just saw are going to grow up, and the impact this (all you and this church) will have on them right now is immeasurable.

God works in the unexpected, small beginnings.

A baby born in some obscure place to an unknown young woman grows into a Man who saves the human race for all time.

God works in the unexpected, small beginnings.

Many of you know who M.R. Zigler was. He was a church executive and peace advocate for many years within the Church of the Brethren. His father was a deacon in the Linville Creek Church of the Brethren in Virginia, and at a very early age Zigler was influenced by the churchmen who visited the Zigler's home. From those early conversations, the seed was planted within Zigler to serve others around the world. He joined his home congregation in 1901 and began his years of service.

In time, he became chairman of the Advisory Committee for Conscientious Objectors, was at the forefront of developing Church World Service, Christian Rural Oversees Program (CROP), and Heifer Project. In 1948, he then was the Brethren representative to the newly formed World Council of Churches. From early seeds sown within him, M.R. Zigler grew into an active servant of God, and eventually helped plant the seeds for what are now very significant, wide-reaching ministries around the world.

God works in the unexpected, small beginnings. Mustard Seed Ministry. Small beginnings—big endings.

In actuality the mustard seed was not the smallest of seeds in Jesus' day. There were smaller. But the image of a mustard seed was used as a saying to communicate smallness. And in Palestine this small seed could in fact grow into quite a sizeable bush or tree.

It really begins with understanding that this is a miracle.

God still does miracles—unexplainable, unattainable, unfathomable actions.

Mustard seed. It starts out small. Many, many times throughout history, the greatest of things begin small, with one person, one idea, one small action. Rosa Parks and Civil Rights. Dan West and Heifer Project. A small group of ordinary men and women who follow Jesus and now billions later.

The beautiful thing about this parable that Jesus uses is that the mustard seed is such an unassuming seed. I mean, you think “Kingdom of Heaven” and think “oak” or “Redwood”. Mustard seed?

But that’s just it. When you’re working with God you’re in for the unexpected. That’s what we just heard for the last four weeks on adversity—that God turns things around and even helps us live abundantly through anything that comes our way.

Upside down kingdom. Working with God you better be in for the unexpected.

Mustard seed.

It’s not really a grand and glorious thing. It’s not what you would expect.

Dan Clark shares this story from his teenage years. He says, “Once my father and I were standing in line to buy tickets for the circus. Finally, there was only one family between us and the ticket counter. This family made a big impression on me. There were eight children, all probably under the age of twelve. You could tell they didn’t have a lot of money. Their clothes were not expensive, but they were clean. The children were well behaved, all of them standing in line, two-by-two behind their parents, holding hands. They were excitedly jabbering about the clowns, elephants and other acts they would see that night. One could sense that they had never been to the circus before. It promised to be a highlight of their young lives.

The father and mother were at the head of the pack standing proud as could be. The mother was holding her husband’s hand, looking up at him as if to say, “You’re my knight in shining armor.” He was smiling and basking in pride, looking at her as if to reply, “You got that right.”

The ticket lady asked the father how many tickets he wanted. He proudly responded, “Please let me buy eight children’s tickets and two adult tickets so I can take my family to the circus.”

The ticket lady quoted the price. The man’s wife let go of his hand, her head dropped, the man’s lip began to quiver. The father leaned a little closer and asked, “How much did you say?”

The ticket lady again quoted the price. The man didn’t have enough money. How was he supposed to turn and tell his eight kids that he didn’t have enough money to take them to the circus?”

Clark says, “Seeing what was going on, my dad put his hand into his pocket, pulled out a \$20 bill, and dropped it on the ground. (Keep in mind, we were not wealthy in any sense of the word!) My father reached down, picked up the bill, tapped the man on the shoulder and said, “Excuse me, sir, this fell out of your pocket.”

The man knew what was going on. He wasn’t begging for a handout but certainly appreciated the help in a desperate, heartbreaking, embarrassing situation. He looked straight into my dad’s eyes, took my dad’s hand in both of his, squeezed tightly onto the \$20 bill, and with his lip quivering and a tear streaming down his cheek, he replied, “Thank you, thank you sir. This really means a lot to me and my family.”

Clark finishes by saying that, “My father and I went back to our car and drove home. We didn’t go to the circus that night, but we didn’t go without.”

Mustard seed.

2 Cor. 9:6-11 says we are to sow generously and joyfully.

God supplies us with the seeds we are to sow, and has given to us generously so we can be generous with others.

What seeds do you sow?

Everything we do plants a seed within the minds and hearts of people. We all sow seeds: within our children, our neighbors, our coworkers, our friends, family members, strangers on the street. Every action plants a seed. And from such small beginnings grow large, living organisms.

Never underestimate what God can do with you and through you. Never underestimate what one small act can accomplish.

In John 6:9,11 we read the account of Jesus feeding the five thousand people. He wants His disciples to step up and do something to help them. But they are a little perplexed as to what they could possibly do for such a large crowd.

“There is a boy here who has five barely loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?’...Then Jesus took the loaves, and when He had given thanks, He distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted.”

A little boy and a bag lunch. God doesn't worry with size. God is not deterred because you feel unequipped. God is not limited to what we think is possible. God works in a one-to-infinity kind of ratio, a bag-lunch-to-five-thousand-people ratio. A let's-speak-and-create-the-universe kind of power.

God's work through us is a miracle. But:

God's work takes effort on our part.

Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like a *“Seed that someone took and sowed.”* God calls us to get into action, to take that seed He has given to us and sow it wherever we are.

I mean, God is not dependent upon us. He will find another way to do His work if you choose not to be a part of it. But He has created you and has a purpose for you to fulfill where you are. You can start right in your field, in your backyard. You don't have to go far, but you really are in mission work where you work, interact with others, at the store, with your neighbors.

What seeds do you sow?

Value small steps.

It is a virtue to have a long range vision, but it is essential for us to realize that we will get there only by a series of many small steps. The old saying holds true that *“Rome wasn't built in a day.”* And neither was the world. Even God took 6 days to create the world. Sometimes, as you go along doing what God has set before you, trying to make a difference in the lives of people, it can seem as if you are getting nowhere. Sometimes it can seem as if the things you are doing are so small in this vast world that there is no way little you could make any lasting change.

But one step, one seed at a time we plant the field for harvest.

Read through the book of Acts in the Bible sometime. If you ever think the Bible is boring, think again. There is so much there just in Acts of what the power of Jesus Christ was doing through His disciples, transforming the landscape forever.

The Apostle Paul and Silas, after being arrested, flogged, thrown in jail, freed from jail by God, they make their way to Thessalonica. They preach the Good News of Jesus Christ. People are changing. But some get angry over all this and say, in Acts 17:6 *“These people who have been turning the world upside-down have come here also.”*

I love that line. They were not saying this as a good thing in their minds, but that is what the power of Jesus Christ is all about—transformation, turning the world upside-down.

Because when you love where there is hate, when you give that cup of cold water to someone in need, when you share the life and joy that comes from Jesus, His power begins to spread and grow, bringing life so that nothing will ever be the same. It happens with just a small act, with you. You cannot ever underestimate what God will do through you.

We are still the church, grown out of the churches Paul and others began long ago. And God is still doing great things with us

Be persistent.

Constancy is one of the essential virtues for Christian ministry. Don't give up.

Because you know what? Often times we do not get to see the mustard tree. As others have said, it is a wise person who plants a tree that he will never get to sit under.

Jesus inaugurated His ministry. He preaches the Word and resists the temptation of Satan. Then Jesus at last begins His ministry. How? By calling a handful of ordinary people like the fisherman Peter saying, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." In other words, Jesus says, "I am going to take back the world, turn everything upside down and reclaim the kingdom of God. And guess who is going to help me?" Amen.