

“Delusions of Grandeur?!”

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Text: Matthew 13:31-33**

Heavenly Father, as we often pray that Your Kingdom would come, we ask this morning that You would send the Holy Spirit to guide us and illuminate Your word as we seek to discern the meaning of Kingdom life. Replace our view of Your kingdom with the true reality of Your Kingdom, present and yet to come. Grant us the faith to be faithful laborers for Your kingdom and use us for Your glorious purposes. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

We Americans, for the most part, have grown fond of having super-sized lives. From our cars to our homes our cultural motto is “the bigger the better.” Whether it is a mall, a menu option, a ball park or an amusement park, we yell a collective cry of “super-size me!” The religious world is not exempt from such desires. Mega-churches and mega-ministries also gather great fanfare. Yet our affection for the big and dramatic is certainly not unique to our day and age.

When Jesus spoke to the crowds about the Kingdom of God, their dreams and expectations were very different than what Jesus would describe through His parables. The most popular opinion among those anticipating the Kingdom of God during Jesus’ time was that the Kingdom would come in a sizeable and dramatic way. They anticipated that when the messiah came to establish his kingdom that it would immediately overturn all of the evil and corruption in the world and that through the power and clout of the messiah, everyone would decidedly know who the boss was. The images that many carried in their heads likely came from Daniel, chapter 4 or a passage from Ezekiel which describes a tree of great height, large and strong, with its top touching the sky; it was visible to the ends of the earth. Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant, and on it was food for all. Under it the beasts of the field found shelter, and the birds of the air lived in its branches; from it every creature was fed (v. 11-12).

The Jewish people expected that the kingdom that the messiah would usher in would be stronger than the one of David and more glorious than all the splendor of Solomon’s reign. This was the grand hope and dream of a people who had once dwelt in the grandeur and power of such earthly kingdoms and who had now been reduced to a seemingly insignificant Roman province. Any true messiah would surely bring a super-sized kingdom that far surpassed the magnificence of ages past.

If you understand this to be the mind set of Jesus’ audience you can see how what He said to them in these parables was down right shocking if not quite disappointing. Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds for the gardener. And when it grows it would mature into the largest of all garden plants and become a tree. A mustard tree might sound odd to us, but that was indeed the size of mustard plants in that place and time. Even so, its mature height was around 10 ft; basically a large shrub in our standards. What happened to being like a great cedar of Lebanon whose height reached to the heavens? Such were the delusions of grandeur for the people of Jesus’ day.

I think we nurture our own delusions of grandeur about God's Kingdom in our own day and place. Like many things, we dream of God's Kingdom to be a quick fix, to bring about instant success and immediate gratification. Yet this is not God's way for this time. When I was frustrated with the slow progress, one of my favorite Pastors I learned from would often remind me that we serve an agrarian God in a dot com world.

We live in an age where we read of folks whose business or industry seems to explode overnight. If God is more powerful and certainly more wise than all those entrepreneurs, then surely He can grant us overnight success and splendor in our kingdom efforts.

Yet Jesus gives us a very different image with which to understand His kingdom. In the parables we read, Jesus depicts how the kingdom's small beginnings result in sizeable and significant outcomes. This process of growth from a tiny seed to a large plant may also be true for other forms of vegetation, yet the mustard seed and resulting plant was a common reference point for people of that day and made a striking contrast to the anticipated splendor of the heaven reaching cedar of Lebanon. Jesus used the small and ordinary to depict something great.

The parable of the mustard seed not only depicts the eventual growth of God's Kingdom, but also its tenaciousness. The hearers of the parable also knew of the persistent multiplication of the mustard plant. The super giant cedars of Lebanon are only able to grow in that one spot on the planet. Yet Mustard trees by contrast, can flourish anywhere the seed hits the ground. When the people then thought of the mustard plant they probably had similar notions to us when we think of dandelions. We know that they are impossible to get rid of and will certainly spread throughout a whole neighborhood of lawns as just the result of one delicate white puff of seeds. Such is the Kingdom of God.

Our parable of the leaven is similar in its depiction of the manner of growth of God's Kingdom. When women would make bread in that day they would keep a small amount of the dough from the batch they were making and save it for future batches. As it sat out it would begin to ferment, enabling it to provide the leavening or rising agent for the entire batch of bread to come. A small amount of yeast could leaven a large quantity of dough as it was able to spread and permeate through the whole mass, transforming all of the dough into an entirely different substance. What would otherwise turn into thin, harder bread, mysteriously becomes a tender and tasty loaf. In leaven, something seemingly small and insignificant has the ability to effect great transformation. Such is the kingdom of God.

The "hook" of today's parable causes us to question our super-size mentality and to embrace the significant influence of small amounts of the kingdom of God. Jesus wants us to know that our small endeavors of kingdom work will have a greater impact and influence than we could ever imagine. This is good news for laborers of the kingdom. While our culture clamors for instantaneous displays of grandeur, those who labor for the kingdom can rest assured that their efforts will stand the test of time and will be multiplied beyond our expectations.

Indeed, God uses small beginnings to do great things for His Kingdom. I was able to see this principle at work yet again this past week while at the Great Escape camp with some of our middle school students. During one of our dinner hours we happened to sit at the same table as our evening speaker. We enjoyed hearing how a large network of youth camps and conferences grew out of a few youth workers' idea to start a ministry together.

In 1977, Chuck Neder (who lead a Weekend of Renewal here at Kirkmont a little over a year ago), and three other men met together at a Holiday Inn in Atlanta to discuss the need for a strong evangelical youth conference. These men each saw the importance of offering kids an experience that would be characterized by challenge, encouragement, and fun. And so they

launched the first Fun in the Son (FITS) conference at Jekyll Island, Georgia, later that summer. Though it began with only 300 high school students and a small staff, FITS has grown to over 4000 participants in four locations, impacting many students' lives for Christ each year.

With Fun in the Son well under way in the mid-eighties, Chuck Neder and Hugh Maclellan sought to provide a high quality ministry opportunity for middle school students with the same purpose and characteristics as the high school conference. In 1984, on the campus of King College in Bristol, Tennessee, the first national middle school conference of its kind commenced-The Great Escape (TGE). The Great Escape has grown to over 5,000 students attending these conferences held on college campuses in Tennessee, Colorado, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, North Carolina and Florida.¹

I experienced this mustard seed to a mustard tree effect in an especially personal way last year at the Great Escape. It often seems that while at the Great Escape I bump into folks from my past ministries and places of ministry training. Bumping into schoolmates from Princeton Seminary who are now also youth pastors is certainly fun but not too extraordinary given the fact that we and the camp take place within a day's drive radius from Princeton, NJ.

So I was quite puzzled last year when across the rec field and worship gatherings I saw a familiar face from my days at Malibu Presbyterian Church in California. Christina Bowes!-surely it couldn't be. She was one of the leaders of the university ministry I was a part of during college. What on earth was she doing in Johnston, PA? Well come to find out, among other things, she had married a Presbyterian Youth Pastor who worked near Philly and was taking some students from their church to camp. They would be leaving that ministry soon to serve as missionaries in South Africa for at least a year.

My even greater surprise came on the last night of camp when the evening speaker invited her to come up and share her testimony. She shared how she had become a Christian at a Great Escape camp when she was 13 during a difficult season of her life and how that had forever changed the course and direction of her life. It was incredible for me to hear this because during my college days I looked up to Christina alot. She was just a few years older than me but was an incredible example of a godly woman who loved the Lord and was willing to serve Him in whatever way He called. And now she had heard God's call to introduce college students to missions work in South Africa! This woman who was to me a faithful servant of God in so many ways and places had become a Christian at the Great Escape! If God did this in and through her, maybe He would do the same in students I had brought to camp. I knew I couldn't begin to fathom His plans for their lives. God used Christina's testimony to remind me that my small act of faithfulness in spending a week at camp with our middle school students could result in great things for His kingdom.

Throughout the history of the Church, God has always been using the few to influence the many or the little to permeate the whole. When you look back to Jesus' first disciples, visions of grandeur and great things are not your initial expectations. They were unimpressive fisherman and tax collectors. They were few compared to the whole world Christ commissioned them to reach in His final words to them before He ascended into heaven. However, the influence that they and the long line of disciples worldwide have had after them is astonishing.

There is a wonderful book called *How Christianity Changed the World* written by Alvin Schmidt. It recounts how those whom Christ has transformed have had more shaping power on world and modern society than most ever realize. For instance, Christian doctrine elevated the status of women and gave them freedom and dignity that they had not experienced before. Other

¹ See history portion of www.ycmhome.org

important elements of our culture and society such as economics, science, education, music and literature all have distinct Christian roots. Christians have sanctified human life by caring for the unborn, the sick, the weak, and the aged more than any other culture or society. The culture of the Greco-roman world shunned the weak. Yet the self-less love of these disciples has been a living demonstration of Christ's compassion to all, and has inspired others, even non-Christians to adopt a more compassionate way of life and to start institutions of mercy such as orphanages, hospitals and other agents of healing and respite for the least among us. Schmidt also shows how Christians, often beginning with one small act of Kingdom faithfulness have changed society for the better.

History has proven to us that, "A reformation begins with one person. One of the great stories of the Christian Church is the story of Telemachus. He was a hermit of the desert, but something told him—the call of God—that he must go to Rome. He went. Rome was nominally Christian, but even in Christian Rome the gladiatorial games went on, in which men fought with each other, and crowds roared with the lust for blood. Telemachus found his way to the games. Eighty thousand people were there to spectate. He was horrified. Were these men slaughtering each other not also children of God? He leaped from his seat, right into the arena, and stood between the gladiators. He was tossed aside. He came back. The crowd were angry; they began to stone him. Still he struggled back between the gladiators. The prefect's command rang out; a sword flashed in the sunlight, and Telemachus was dead. Suddenly there was a hush; suddenly the crowd realized what had happened; a holy man lay dead. Something happened that day to Rome, for there were never again any gladiatorial games. By his death one man had let loose something that cleansed an empire. Someone must begin a reformation; he need not begin it in a nation; he may begin it in his home or where he works. If he begins it no man knows where it will end."²

God's Kingdom may start as small as a mustard seed or as insignificant as a bit of leaven, yet its eventual growth and outcome will far exceed anything we could have anticipated or desired. The splendor of God's Kingdom is different than the splendor the world anticipates, yet its spread is unstoppable for we know what the reign of Christ will be like in the final age. As the angel of Revelation declares: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever." (Revelation 11:15)

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2, Revised Edition*, (Philadelphia, PA, The Westminster Press, 1975), pg 77.