

“The Kin-dom of God”
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 June 13, 2021

Mark 4:26-32 (NRSV)

²⁶He also said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

³⁰He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³²yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

The Kingdom of God has come near. That’s what John the Baptist came on the scene preaching. We read about it every year at the beginning of Advent. And then the Kingdom of God came very near...the Kingdom of God was and *is* present in and through Jesus, right here on earth. The Kingdom is here!

But *where* is it, really? I’ve looked all around and I can’t find any castles with drawbridges and moats. If there’s a kingdom here, surely we’ve got some big castles or palaces. And what about the royalty? Where are the kings and queens, princes and princesses? As a parent, I’ve seen quite a few princesses around my house – the Disney-kind, anyway. But what about this Kingdom of God that Jesus talks about? What is this Kingdom that Jesus even seems to struggle for a comparison?

Jesus says this kingdom is like a mustard seed. It’s such a tiny thing, He tells them. Now, really, they already knew this. In His parables, Jesus used examples that His listeners would understand. They knew that a mustard seed was tiny, even if *we* don’t have such an immediate connection with it as the original audience did.

And those who heard Jesus’ message that day probably agreed immediately. If they were part of the Kingdom, then that mustard seed comparison was pretty accurate,

because Jesus' little band of followers were pretty small and insignificant. They must have looked at themselves in comparison to the Roman empire and all of the forces at the command of the emperor. He could wipe out this band of followers of Jesus in minutes. *So, yeah, Jesus, this kingdom is pretty small, just like a mustard seed.*

They could then have gone home pretty downtrodden, discouraged about the tiny size of this Kingdom of God of which they were somehow a part. Why did Jesus make that comparison? It seems like it would just make the disciples feel depressed. But, of course, we know that Jesus went on. He says that they are like a mustard seed – this tiny mustard seed – because that smallest of the seeds becomes a great shrub with large branches which the birds can make nests in. Jesus is telling them that, yes, they are small. Yes, they appear to be insignificant to the world, but, just wait – that tiny seed is going to grow and grow and become something spectacular.

And so we have this parable about how the kingdom is like a mustard seed, starting out very small and growing into something quite large. This parable is recorded not only in Mark where we read it today, but also in Matthew and Luke. In each account, this mustard plant just seems to get bigger and bigger. In Mark's account of this parable, the mustard seed grows and becomes a really large shrub, with branches big enough for birds to make nests. In Matthew and Luke, that "greatest of shrubs" actually becomes a *tree* for the birds. This tiny seed becomes a great and mighty tree! And that, Jesus has been telling them, is what the kingdom of God is like.

So, if we want to be big and mighty, like a tree, we've just got to wait a while, let that tiny seed start growing and growing, and eventually, it will be a tree that the birds can build nests in. *That's* what the kingdom is about.

Except that I think that was not the point Jesus was trying to get across. Now, I do think that some of that has come true. The band of disciples that followed Jesus around has become the world's largest religion, with somewhere around 2.3 billion followers. From tiny, tiny roots has come a very large church, and that is to be celebrated, but I don't know if it was what Jesus was saying to His disciples that day.

You see, they knew, much better than we do, that mustard seeds don't *actually* grow into large trees. Jesus was employing a bit of hyperbole here. Mustard plants are actually annuals, and the highest that they grew was about four feet tall. This was not a plant that most people wanted to grow, anyway. This was a plant that was invasive. It is described in some places as "an aggressive annual weed..." This was not a plant that people actually *wanted* growing in their gardens. No farmer would plant a mustard seed in their garden, because soon they wouldn't have a garden, they'd just have a really large mustard plant. The Roman nobleman Pliny said of the mustard plant: "It grows entirely wild, and when it has been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place rid of it."

For those of us from the south, I think a pretty good comparison is to kudzu. For those who may not know, Kudzu is a vine that grows and grows along the sides of the roads in the south. It was brought to the U.S. and placed along the sides of roadways to keep the steep banks from eroding. It has done that job and plenty more, growing and expanding, and it is almost impossible to remove. Kudzu has a few nicknames, including "mile-a-minute vine" and "the vine that ate the South."

Now, *that* is what I think Jesus was talking about. Not really that the tiny mustard seed might grow up into a tall tree. Not really that this tiny Kingdom of God might one day be a tall tree. I think the bigger issue for Jesus was that this tiny mustard seed would spread and spread and grow and grow in *width* and *breadth*, more so than in *height*. Jesus was telling His disciples that the Kingdom of God was not like the kingdoms of this earth. It was not really going to be one that would grow up and up; it was a kingdom that would grow outward, spreading forth in a way that it is wild and unpredictable and almost impossible to remove.

Shane Claiborne talks about it in his book *The Irresistible Revolution*. He says "The Jesus revolution is not a frontal attack on the empires of this world. It is a subtle contagion, spreading one little life... at a time" (p. 336).

That's what God's Kingdom is like! In fact, there are those who suggest we drop the word "Kingdom" because of all that it connotes of earthly rulers and power, castles and royalty. They suggest that we use the term "Kin-dom" to connote that we are a family. The

Kin-dom of God is growing, like a family, spreading wider and wider. It reminds me of the way that families grow, with family gatherings including more and more people as there are marriages and births and adoptions. God's family – God's kin-dom – is growing like that. For this world really doesn't need more huge palaces, surrounded by moats and drawbridges. It needs more of this contagious, mustard-seed like growth. This wild, unpredictable growth that spreads and spreads and you are scarcely able to get rid of it. That's what we need more of. We need more of *us* telling our friends, co-workers, and neighbors about this contagious love we've found in the kin-dom of Jesus. Not a kingdom spread with warfare and crusades, but a kin-dom that spreads little by little, further and further, spreading God's love as it goes.

One more thing about mustard plants: they are not orderly and controlled, but rather go where they please. That's something else to be said about God's kin-dom. Often the church has tried its best to control things, to want to shape things so that they are just the way we want them. We, as part of our long Presbyterian heritage, value order and control, and so we often try to maintain that order with a strong sense of the right way to do things. At the same time, we rebel against that order, trying to let the Spirit move and go where it would. We want to be orderly and dignified and in control, but sometimes we want to just let the Spirit move in us. Both are needed, but I think Jesus was speaking today to that freer side of us. He was telling us that the kingdom of God grows like a mustard plant – like kudzu. It's not something we can control. It's disorderly and chaotic, and part of us is going to want to rebel against that. But I think Jesus is telling us we've got to learn to let go sometimes. We've got to learn to let the Spirit go where it will and the mustard plant grow where it will.

The kin-dom of God is like a mustard seed. Tiny and ordinary, but bursting with potential. Once it starts growing, *watch out* because we never know where the Spirit is going to lead and just where that mustard plant is going to grow. May we allow God's love to work in and through us, each of us, so that God's kin-dom may grow, ever wider and wider. Amen.