

The parables of the mustard seed and the small leaven continue our lexicon study of the parables of Jesus. Jesus told these stories always with one point to each parable, a point he wanted listeners to remember. We need not get hung up on all the subtleties of why Jesus chose these stories or what the components mean in and of themselves. Jesus wanted us to look at the overall picture painted in the parable.

Jesus chose illustrations from the everyday world of the average person in his time. It was the average person who hung on his every word and was eager to learn more of the faith as illustrated by this wonderful teacher.

When we hear these two little stories, we may well miss their strangeness. Mustard and yeast appear to be very basic. What is so remarkable about these things we may well ask?

Mustard seeds in Jesus day were not something to put on your hotdog or hamburger or corned beef sandwich. Jews deemed mustard seeds as dangerous. They were indeed small, insignificant seeds and yet they were insidious. There is an old Jewish rabbi basic rule: never plant a mustard seed in your own garden. If you wanted mustard, plant it in some out of the way place where you do not care what happens. Though the mustard seed looks small and innocent, it keeps growing and growing and in short time it will take over your garden.

In fact, it will become the biggest plant in your garden, so big that even birds will rest in it.

Take a handful of mustard seeds and pop them into your mouth. You will quickly realize the seeds though small are very potent. There is a lot of power in these little seeds.

Jesus said that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed planted in a garden. It grows and grows and takes over the place. In a sense we have the old adage at work here: "Big outcomes often have small beginnings."

In a way, Jesus is saying we are like those mustard seeds or the small pinch of leaven. We are small, seemingly insignificant individuals. None of us are very important or very big in terms of this world, but the Kingdom of God lives in us, and we can and have power! The point of these short stories is simple: we are small, but we are powerful. The Kingdom of God starts small, but it has powerful potential to take over the world.

Do you believe what Jesus is saying to us? We know we are small, but do we believe we are powerful? Jesus appears to say we are and can be. Perhaps we need to believe this ourselves and ask how we can harness this power for good.

When I think of something which begins small and yet is nearly impossible to eradicate, I am reminded of my childhood in my mother's gardens. In Manitoba we had a terrible weed known as portchulacka. It had small rubber like leaves and spread out similar to a spider plant. If, when weeding, even a single leaf should escape, a new plant would grow.

The plants were thrown in fires to consume it; yet we were never able to overcome its determination and stamina. Perhaps the Kingdom of God is like portchulacka; it just keeps growing and growing and in time takes over the garden itself.

So, these familiar parables about the seed and the leaven, is there anything new we can learn from these stories? Actually yes, what we learn from Jesus was all new.

The Old Testament prophets taught when God's kingdom comes and the Messiah is on earth, the Messiah will exercise immediate, worldwide domination. In a moment of time, all that was evil and wrong on earth would be made right. For good or bad, the Messiah would be in charge!

The new information in Jesus' parables is that God's kingdom will not start this way. Rather, it will quietly begin (like the mustard seed or the leaven) in a very small, virtually invisible way. But like the mustard plant and the leavening process, the kingdom will grow to extensive size and influence prior to its worldwide domination at the Messiah's Second Coming.

Think of what was just said. Is that not an accurate description of the beginning of the Christian movement?

If you were God planning to invade human history, would you have planned and executed it as God did?

Would you have chosen Mary and Joseph in a backwater part of the Roman Empire to have his child? This Jesus lived quietly except for three short years of ministry. These years ended in seeming complete failure: rejected by his people, betrayed by one of his disciples, deserted by the rest, condemned by Rome, and erased in the most brutal form of execution. Even though his followers claimed he was raised from the dead, they were hardly the kind of people you would expect to start a worldwide movement. Writer Gary Delashmutt says this about the followers of Jesus in his day: "they were blue-collar workers who came from the wrong part of Israel and had no formal education, military might, or political clout. This movement should have evaporated like hundreds of other small religious sects."

But we know, do we not, that like the mustard seed and leaven, Jesus predicts that God's kingdom begins small but in time will become very large and far-reaching in its influence.

Jesus said: The Kingdom of God is like yeast or leaven a woman used in making bread. Even though she put in only a little yeast in three measures of flour, it permeated every part of the dough. This is very interesting as yeast is almost always bad in the Bible. Yeast became a symbol of some small bad thing that corrupted the whole batch of dough. Jesus told his disciple to be on guard against "the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy" (Luke 12:1). Paul compared yeast to sin and to false teaching and both times he warned them: a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.

Some people listening to Jesus were scandalized. Here was Jesus saying the Kingdom of God works in very similar ways to the way sin works. Just a little bit of Kingdom goodness can work through a whole batch of dough. And just like sin, the Kingdom changes everything it touches.

When we understand Jesus words, we see a surprise in this story. The woman mixes the yeast into “three measures of flour.” This is not three cups of flour but enough to feed a small army. Three measures is nearly 40 litres of flour. It would make 110 pounds or 50 kilograms of Bread! A little yeast really does go a long way!

So what is the point? “We’re small, but we are powerful!”
Clearly a point being made is that one man or one woman can make a difference.

Now, a story from early church history: In the fourth century a little know monk Telemachus from Asia which then was the Roman province comprising most of modern Turkey, was led by an inner voice to travel to Rome without really knowing why. He followed the crowds to the Coliseum where he witnessed the abominable spectacle of two gladiators fighting to the death. Telemachus stepped down into the arena and tried to separate the two men. Tradition has it that Telemachus was heard to shout three times: “In the name of Christ, forbear!”

The spectators who were there to see the slaughter were indignant. They rose up as one and stoned Telemachus, the peacemaker, to death.

When the Emperor Honorius was informed of this act, he considered Telemachus a victorious martyr and decreed an end to the gladiatorial combats which had so long been held at Rome. We know that it took some time for these games to end, but it was the action of one man that triggered the beginning of the end of human butchery as a spectator sport.

Telemachus discovered he was small, but he was powerful. His action and his willingness to die for what he believed brought change for good he never expected.

So our question should be: if we are small, yet powerful, what could God do with us?

The answer really is we do not have any way to grasp what is possible when we act in faith in all aspects of our life. When Jesus left his disciples, he commissioned them to go and preach and teach the gospel and to tell their story of what they had heard, seen and believed. It will not be your words alone Paul insisted. It is who you are and whose you are. All that you are, your words and actions, are what can lead others into the knowledge of God’s kingdom. If we invite God’s spirit into our lives to motivate and permeate all we are and wish to be, then God’s spirit begins to initiate a gradual process of spiritual transformation, that radically changes your thinking, attitudes, values, relationships, goals and plans, etc. Writers through the centuries have known that nothing delights Jesus more than taking people who seem least likely to be able to represent him.

Jesus transforms them into people who are so permeated by his influence that they become powerful witnesses of his transforming power.

If this be so, all we can exclaim is WOW! Indeed, though we are small, we can be powerful for good in God's world.

What do we pray for as we journey along this adventure of faith? We read from the Old Testament the story of King Solomon. After he was crowned, he was asked by God what gift did he wish as he began his reign. He asked God for wisdom and knowledge to enable him to become and be a good ruler. Wisdom and knowledge, gifts we should pray God would bless us with in our journey of faith.

Never underestimate what God can do for you. Never underestimate what God can do for others through you. Never underestimate the power you have to assist others glimpse the love of God and their place in his kingdom so they might claim this place for themselves.

As the disciples of old, we too must take our courage into our hands and be prepared to tell others our story of our faith journey. We are God's ambassadors however inadequate we will always feel. Nevertheless, God calls us to service, joy and peace.

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