

Earthly Stories, Heavenly Meanings: The Mustard Seed

The Transfiguration of Our Lord, Sunday, February 22, 2009

This Sunday is the final Sunday in our series, Earthly Stories, Heavenly Meanings. We're going to be looking at our Gospel reading today from Matthew 13:31-35, so I invite you to open your Bibles with me to our reading.

We've taken a journey the past several weeks through the teachings of Jesus as He has opened an understanding of the Kingdom of Heaven and the heart of God to us. During this series we've discussed the parable of the sower, and talked about what the condition of our 'soil' is; we looked at the parable of the hidden treasure and pearl of great worth, and saw how deeply God loves and values us – how we are the pearls He gave up everything to get, while at the same time asking how deeply we desire the Kingdom of God in our midst.

We then took a look at the parable about wolves in sheep's clothing and a tree and its fruit, and talked about pseudo-prophetas's – false prophets and getting caught in sticky, thorny situations. We realized that sometimes we let the wolves into our midst because we're not holding them accountable to the word of God, and also invited an honest look at the scars so many of us carry, and getting free from those things that would hold on to us and cut us even deeper.

We talked about weddings in that time with two different parables, one focusing on the need to be ready for the return of the bridegroom, and the other about how eternal life in heaven is a gift of grace. We looked at the difference between 'cheap' and 'costly' grace, and realized how blessed we are to be the children of God. Finally, between these two wedding parables we talked about the parable of the wineskins and unshrunk cloth. We saw the Gospel can't be mixed with anything else, and the good news of Jesus' love stands on its own as the one and only powerful way of salvation. During our look at this parable, we asked three questions: Are we joyful or mourning? Do we fully realize the love of God in Christ for us, and the message of Ephesians 2:8-9 that says *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast?* And three, Are we ready and willing to be used by the Holy Spirit, even if that means being stretched in ways that we think might make us burst?

This isn't meant to be a stroll down memory lane, but rather a recap to build to the last sermon in this series, and serve as a transition into Lent, which begins this Wednesday with our Children's Ash Wednesday service at 6:00, and then our regular Ash Wednesday service at 7:30. Because today we're asking the question, "What are we left with after all these teachings of Jesus, and where do we go now? How does all of this apply to my life, and make a difference?"

Before we get to our parable and it's application, there is one more thing happening today we need to take a look at. Today is Transfiguration Sunday. I'd like to read the Transfiguration story to you from Luke 9:28-36. You don't need to turn in your Bibles to Luke, but you might

want to make a note of it in the margins of your Bibles near our passage from Matthew, because we're going to be talking in a few minutes about how the two are related. ...*Jesus ... took Peter, John and James with Him and went up onto a mountain to pray. As He was praying, the appearance of His face changed, and His clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about His departure, which He was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men standing with Him. As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to Him, "Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters – one for You, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what he was saying.) While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. A voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is My Son, whom I have chosen; listen to Him." When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples kept this to themselves, and told no one at that time what they had seen.*

In the space of just a few moments, the three disciples had seen Jesus in His glory, and the Kingdom of God had come to them in a personal and tangible way. Now hang on to this as we turn to our parable today, the parable of the Mustard Seed in Matthew 13:31-33:

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches." He told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough."

How do a mustard seed, yeast and the Transfiguration all fit together, and what do they mean for us today? Let's start with the earthly story part of the parables.

In your bulletins this morning, you should have all found a single mustard seed taped to the inside cover. We need to thank Kathy MacDougall and Jean Henderson for all their work in helping me to get these seeds taped inside the bulletins! As you can see from the seed, it is tiny. There's not much too it. But you know what? If you were to take a mustard seed and plant it, it could yield a tree, or large bush, that can grow up to 15 feet tall. A mustard seed like the one in your bulletin can yield a 15 foot tree that provides shelter for the birds and shade for the weary. Yet, if you're not careful, you can easily lose that seed. In fact, some of you may have already lost it from your bulletin! If you did and would like another one to take home, there may be some extra bulletins in the back, and if not, I'll get you a seed!

The people who heard this parable when Jesus told it knew exactly what He was talking about. They had seen many times over the miraculous growth of the seed into a tree. That earthly story is very understandable, and anyone who has ever planted anything understands it, too. The 'twist' in this parable is having the Kingdom of God compared to that little seed.

As for the yeast, that is another thing the people would have easily understood, as will anyone who has ever made bread. It only takes a little bit of yeast to yield a big, fluffy loaf of bread. This little one ounce package of yeast will yield a large loaf of bread by simply working its way through the dough. Again, the people would have understood this simply enough, but the twist is the Kingdom of God being compared to that. And how does the Transfiguration figure into this? Hold on to that question for just a few more minutes. Let's go first to the Heavenly Meaning of these parables.

The Christian faith began, essentially, with 12 people. After them, there were about 120 believers on the day of Pentecost who were filled with the Holy Spirit and preached to the crowds that had gathered in Jerusalem. As a result of that, about 3000 people became believers in Jesus in one day, and the explosion just kept happening all throughout the world as more and more believed in the name of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. And it all started with 12 ordinary men: John and James, fishermen; Peter and Andrew, businessmen; Matthew, a tax collector; Simon, a political extremist; and Thomas, one who didn't even know for sure what he believed until Jesus appeared to him in the flesh. From these few and others like them, the name of Jesus spread throughout the world and found a home in the hearts of untold billions of people, and that continues right down to us here today. You can make a note in the margins of your Bibles: LCC is part of the Mustard tree.

Another meaning is that in order for a seed to produce a plant, it has to die. You can write John 12:24 in the margins of your Bibles: *"I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."* In order for the church to grow, there had to be a death of the seed from which it sprang. Jesus was going to have to die. Not only die, but rise again. We're getting closer now to the tie to the Transfiguration...

A third meaning, and one that makes a direct impact on our lives is that little can be great in the hands of God. The little that we are can be great through the power of the Holy Spirit, and can make an eternal, kingdom-impacting difference in the life of those around us. In the seed you were given this morning, you are holding in your hands a miracle in the making – a tiny seed that has the potential of growing into a 15 foot tree. I want you to know God holds in His hands this morning miracles, too – you and me. And like this seed, we have the potential of growing deep and tall in our faith and spreading the Kingdom of God to the ends of the world. But it takes a 'death', too.

It takes a death to the self. It takes a death to the things of this world. Luther called it 'drowning the Old Adam.' We drown him in repentance and confession, in absolution and acceptance of the free gift of grace. The problem with drowning the Old Adam, as Luther also used to say, is that he's a really good swimmer! Daily repentance and a leaning on the Grace of God is the cornerstone for all of us.

What about the yeast in the parable? What's the Heavenly meaning there? I'm going to make you a promise this morning. I'm going to guarantee you something today – the more time we spend in God's word, and with God's people, and in conversation with God in prayer and praise, the more the 'yeast' of the Holy Spirit is going to work through us and we will see a difference in our lives. We will grow, we will change, and we will become more and more what we were meant to be all along, until the day we see Jesus with our own eyes and arrive in the place He has prepared for us. 1 John 3:2 says, *Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known.* The yeast of the Holy Spirit will continue to work in us to fill us with His power, His presence, His peace, His strength to impact the world where He has placed us.

And that's the tie to the Transfiguration of Christ. You see, in the Transfiguration account, Peter sometimes gets laughed at because of his comment – *"It is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters – one for You, one for Moses and one for Elijah."* Why did he want to stay there? He wanted to stay because he ran face-to-face into the Kingdom of God, and he knew there could be nothing better. He wanted to stay because He saw Jesus the Christ, Moses the law-giver, and Elijah the great prophet all standing together. He wanted to stay because he knew He was on Holy ground, and every other place would be nothing more than just dirt.

He wanted to stay because for the first time in his life He was overwhelmed by the power of the Holy Spirit to such an extent he didn't want it to end. Imagine what the world would be like if there would be more Christians like Peter who deeply desired and sought after the presence of Jesus in their lives, and never wanted to let go of Him.

Our parable today says the Kingdom of God is going to grow and expand. If Peter and the others had stayed on the mountain top, that would have never happened. The rest of us would still be in the lowlands hopelessly lost and looking for help. In meeting Jesus, Peter and the rest of the Apostles' lives had been changed, and they could not keep it to themselves. Peter, James and John had to come down off the mountain and go back to work. The Kingdom of God needed their 'seeds' to sew the truth of the Gospel message into an untold number of people, who, in turn, would tell others, who would tell others, and on and on.

Now what's the application for us today? You can write Matthew 17:20 in the margins of your Bibles, *"I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."*

You can also write, Isaiah 55:10-11, *"As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is My Word that goes out from My mouth: It will not return to Me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."*

God's word has been given to you and me. We are the seeds He has chosen to do the work He has planned for us. What's the work? To plant these seeds to grow the Kingdom of God. All along through this series we've looked at what Jesus has been teaching us about the Kingdom of God, and now He is telling us this Kingdom of God is going to grow and become larger and larger.

And it begins with you and me.

It begins with us leaving our 'mountain of Transfiguration' and going back out into the world with the truth that we've seen and heard.

It begins with a word of hope and encouragement to you and me – we don't do this alone. *“My Word ... will not return to Me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”*

It begins with a promise Jesus made to His disciples and us at the end of Matthew 28 – *“I am with you always, even to the end of the world.”*

It begins with a death. Jesus' death and resurrection; our death to ourselves and the world and our resurrection to life with Jesus; the death to the mountain-top experiences, and the life we've been given daily.

In a few days we begin the season of Lent. Starting next Sunday we're turning our attention towards the Cross of Calvary and the culmination of Jesus' earthly life. All the teachings He's given His Disciples and us, all the time He's spent with them and us, come to a head starting next week. The death He died means life for us, and His resurrection means Life with a capital “L” for us.

This parable is about seed and yeast, about a transformation of the world and a working of the Holy Spirit in you and me. It's about the great commission to reach out to the lost, and letting the Holy Spirit have His way in us.

And it all begins with a little seed.

Will you please pray with me?

Lord Jesus, throughout this series we've studied Your teachings. We've looked at Your words and saw how they still mean as much to us today as they did when You said them the first time. We've seen how You've opened the Kingdom of God and revealed His heart to us. Be with us now as we end this series with this parable today. Help us to open ourselves to the workings of Your Holy Spirit in us. Help us to open ourselves to the work You have called us to do. Let the seed of faith You've given us grow and bring us closer to You and reach to others.

Thank You for loving us; thank You for reaching to us; thank You for teaching us. Help us to never forget.

Amen