

Windows On the Word: The Mustard Seed

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Matthew 13:31-32

Of all the windows in our Windows on the Word series, the window of the mustard seed parable is the hardest one to find. I can't really expect you to see it from where you are sitting. If you want a picture of it, your best option is to look at the cover of your bulletin. The window is hidden in the balcony notch on the west side of the church. The balcony doesn't come straight all the way across, it cuts in by the sound board, and tucked away in that little corner toward the bottom you will see the picture of this tree. There are the trunks. There are the branches. And in the branches are the birds of the air who have come there to shelter. You can't see it on the cover, but if you look at the window, there are more birds flying towards the tree to roost there. Look carefully at the bulletin cover and you will also see the seed. See the brown oval at the bottom of the trunk? That's the seed in Jesus' parable.

Before I talk about the words of this parable, I want to talk about hardware stores. If you are my age or older you will remember a time when most hardware stores looked different. When I was growing up, most hardware stores were small. There were lots of mom and pop hardware stores spread throughout my town. These were small, friendly establishments. They were packed with all the stuff homeowners needed to keep their homes functioning, tools and tiles, faucets and fasteners, washers and wingnuts. The proprietors were friendly and helpful and they knew their stuff. They could give you personal attention, and if they didn't have something, they could order it and it would be in in a week to ten days.

There are still stores like this around, but far fewer of them. Over the course of my lifetime, the hardware mega stores have pushed out the mom and pop operations. Stores like Lowes, Home Depot and Menards. These stores aren't in neighborhoods; they are usually situated on major thoroughfares in commercial districts. They are grand temples of hardware. They aim to have everything you need right there. The customer service is not as good, but they give you lots of stuff and lots of choice. These mega stores have swept away many of the small hardware stores. It's not that people didn't like the small mom and pop stores; it's just that they couldn't compete with the selection and convenience of the big boys.

Something similar is happening to North American churches. North American Christianity used to be powered by small and middle-sized churches. These churches were mostly situated in residential neighborhoods. They were surrounded by homes and schools. But in the 80's and 90's megachurches began dominating the landscape. Megachurches are generally defined as churches with membership over 2000 people, but many of them are much, much larger than that. These churches were not in local neighborhoods; they too were located near interstates and major intersections. Megachurches can deliver things that smaller churches can't. Top notch professional musicians. Really great preachers who deliver knockout sermons week after week. Full time youth staff for every age group. Professional video and sound and lighting people who deliver a worship experience that matches the quality of the best Broadway shows.

Megachurches are growing faster than small and middle sized churches. An increasing percentage of American Christians choose a megachurch for their Sunday worship. Drive through just about every large and midsize American city and you will see multiple megachurches as part of the religious landscape. By contrast, small churches are struggling. Attendance is going down, membership rolls are shrinking, and many small churches are closing down completely. Covid has only accelerated these trends. So in a weird way, the story of churches and hardware stores parallel each other.

The parallels continue. New pressures are forming. In the hardware world, Lowes and Home Depot are suddenly facing new competition. They used to be top of the food chain, but now they are hunted. What's the threat for them? Online companies. Amazon. I didn't buy my leaf blower at Lowes; I bought it online. Online is the new hardware giant. Is something similar happening in churches? Yes. Livestreaming has come to the church. Now worshippers don't need to be limited to local churches, they can search for church services all over the country. Now people find services they love in California or Colorado, or, who knows, maybe even in Canada. "The preacher is terrific and the music is just how I like it. This is my new church!" There is no time in my ministry where the future of the North American church has been so pressured, where the changes have come so fast, and when planning for the future has been more challenging.

All this came to mind when I dug into the parable of the mustard seed this week. This parable is situated in the middle of a whole chapter full of Jesus' teaching. Throughout this teaching Jesus is trying to teach us the basics of the kingdom. Seven times in this chapter alone, Jesus starts to tell a parable by saying, "The Kingdom of heaven is like." As church people we are learning to live as citizens of his kingdom. In Matthew 13, Jesus is helping us do that. Jesus can help us figure out the heart of our work in these confusing times.

So, seven times he says, "the Kingdom of heaven is like." It's kind of grand beginning, isn't it? It's a little like, "Ladies and gentlemen I am going to reveal to you the kingdom of the living God! This kingdom is ruled by the King of kings himself! All other powers of this world must finally yield to this kingdom! I will now pull back the golden curtain and you will see its majesty!" With such an introduction, what do you expect to see? You expect maybe something like St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome on Easter morning, packed with worshippers, glorious music filling the church. Or maybe you expect to see one of those megachurches, packed with 10,000 beaming worshippers, 10,000 hands raised in praise. Or maybe, since Jesus talks about the Kingdom of *heaven*, you expect a heavenly scene: rank upon rank of angels, the rider on the white horse leading them all into battle. Forward into battle, see his banners roll.

Instead, when Jesus pulls back the curtain, we see...a tiny mustard seed. Jesus says, 'if you want to know where to see God at work, if you want to know how God works through his people, look at this seed, and look at the tree that grows from this tiny seed.' How does this parable help center us during these confusing times? Two ways. We can learn something about the essence of the church by looking at the seed, and by looking at the tree that comes from the seed. Let's start with the tree.

When we look at the tree we see that the ways of the kingdom are pretty plain. The mustard tree as you find it in Israel is not a particularly attractive plant. There are lots of trees and plants that can grab your attention. A rhododendron bush in full bloom in the spring. It's like a like an explosion of color. You drive by and say, 'wow!' A maple tree at peak color in the Michigan fall. Vivid reds and yellows, sometimes with a tinge of green still on the leaf – people literally drive hundreds of miles to see them. No one will ever say 'wow' about a mustard tree. It's pretty scrubby. It doesn't look like the tree on the front of your bulletin. It's more of a cross between a bush and a tree. At best, it gets 12 feet high. There are no graceful branches; it's braches and leaves are very dense and tangled. So it's not a beautiful tree. Go online and look at the pictures – the real pictures not the romanticized ones – it's scrubby. But don't be fooled by its plain appearance. It's a source of real flourishing. Its roots prevent soil erosion. The density of its branches provides good shade from the hot Judean sun. And it's a fabulous place for a bird to perch or make a nest. Those dense branches provide protection and shade for the hatchlings. This very common looking plant is full of goodness.

So it is with the church and the work of the kingdom. LaGrave has a lot of things that are beautiful and do make people stop and say 'wow.' We have beautiful stained glass windows and soaring spires. We have beautiful music. Organ postludes that you can feel in your chest. Beautiful choral music. On Easter morning the congregational singing shakes the rafters. But Jesus reminds us that the heart kingdom work is plain and scrubby.

We had a four-hour council and elders meeting on Monday. It was not pretty, but it was good. We spent the first 2 and a half hours wrestling with the business of the church, and then in elders meeting we heard reports from all our visiting teams. That took a while because all the elders had been delivering poinsettias over the Christmas season. We deliver those plants to all the widows and widowers who want them. I'll bet there were close to a hundred plants delivered. And many of those deliveries included a time of coffee and conversation and prayer. In addition to the poinsettias, there were all the other regular visits and contracts that the visiting teams made. Hospital visits, house visits, phone calls. Most of these visits are as ordinary as can be. "I delivered a poinsettia to Mrs. Vandersma. I had to ring the doorbell a couple of times and I was worried the poinsettia would freeze, but I got in. We talked for about ten minutes and she told me about her kids. She might have a knee replacement this summer she doesn't know yet. I promised to pray for her."

As pastoral encounters go, that's pretty ordinary stuff. It's no rhododendron bush, it's a mustard tree of a visit. But on Monday night we heard about dozens and dozens of those kinds of visits. When it was all done, we said to each other this is such good kingdom work. Each visit was pretty ordinary, but together you had a sense that God was doing a great work, the grace of God was watering the tree! To change the metaphor, the scrubby little bush was burning with the presence of God. And that stuff is the heart of the church. I love our building, but if we didn't have this building the church could still function. I love our organ, but if we

didn't have an organ, the church could still live out its mission. I love being your pastor, but if you didn't have a professional preacher in a robe, we could still do the work of the church. What the church cannot do without is those scrubby acts of care and service and witness. People praying together. People gathering together to study the Word and pray. People supporting each other and helping each other follow Jesus. People who try to make their ordinary lives a witness to Jesus in word and deed. It's all pretty ordinary stuff, but without it, the church isn't the church. Jesus reminds us: you can be a fancy downtown church with stained glass windows, or you could be a slick mega church with the best praise band in town, but if you are missing those things, you are missing the essentials.

The other way this parable tells us about the heart of our work is in the more familiar way we think of this parable. God doesn't just use plain things; he uses small things to build the kingdom. We don't need to give God much to work with. A mustard seed is enough. Mustard seeds are tiny – about the size of the head of a pin. Much smaller than an apple seed. You don't need to make an enormous sacrifice to offer a mustard seeds worth of faith. You don't need to take some fearful risk. You don't need to be talented and strong for God to use what you've got.

Most of you know that Cynthia Roelofs died just before Christmas. She went into hospice in Mid-December and then died about a week later down in Florida. She was 93. It made me sad, because if you knew her she was a strong, positive woman who loved her church. She wasn't flashy; she did a million small, plain things that built up the people around her. I think it was the middle of the month when I heard from her kids that she was in hospice. They told me she was unresponsive, and wouldn't last that long. That night I went home and in my mailbox was a card from Cynthia. It was a sympathy card offering comfort and hope after the loss of Linda's mom. Cynthia was a great card writer. She always filled a whole panel of the card with news and words of encouragement. The same was true of this card. The handwriting was a little shakier, but all the same encouragement was there. The assurance of prayers, the hope of the gospel. Right up to the end, even as her life was ending, she was still planting mustard seeds, and I will admit that when I read the card I felt like God had taken her mustard seed and made it into a tree and I was sheltering in its branches.

I need to say one more thing. Of course when Jesus told this parable of the Kingdom, he wasn't just talking about our mustard seed actions, he was talking about himself. Remember John 12? In John 12, Jesus tells his followers: "Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains a single seed, but if it dies, it produces many seeds." Jesus is the mustard seed at the heart of the kingdom. He was a small plain seed – a baby, born to poor parents, born in a stable and laid in a manger. But out of that small, plain seed grew the true vine. When that small seed was planted in death, a shoot sprung up from the stump of Jesse and it grew so fast, soon its branches stretched from Jerusalem to Samaria and to Asia minor and to the ends of the earth. Today that tree has branches in every nation tribe and language, fruitful congregations filled with his grace, congregations where his word is spoken, his name is praised, and his work is done. Those branches are everywhere. One of those branches is right here on LaGrave avenue. And we are the birds who have taken refuge in his branches.

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