

**Earthy Wisdom: Jesus' Parables of Creation**  
**Part 7: Parable of the Mustard Seed**

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Scripture: Matthew 13:31-32

At the beginning of this series, I claimed that Jesus must have spent a lot of time contemplating God's Creation, and how God is revealed in it, since so many parables are centered in some aspect of Creation. Our parable this morning about a tiny mustard seed that grows into "the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree" appears to prove me wrong.

Mustard seeds do indeed grow into shrubs – ranging anywhere from a few inches tall to over six feet – but they do not become trees! Sure, if you type "mustard tree" into Google you will find a few images of a "toothbrush tree," which is alternatively known as a "mustard tree," but these are not related in any way to the mustard plant.

Jesus's first-century audience would have known that mustard plants don't become trees, as mustard is found throughout Israel. Those who come on the Holy Land Pilgrimage in January will likely see mustard in full bloom, turning fields into bright yellow expanses.

So, would Jesus's audience have been smirking when Jesus claims that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that turns into a great tree in which "the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches"? Would they have thought he is ignorant?

Perhaps. But it is far more likely that we're the ignorant ones, not Jesus.

Parables are a lot like jokes. If a joke has to be explained to you, either the joke-teller hasn't told a very good joke, or you aren't "in" on the joke. That is, there's something that others know that you don't. In this case, Jesus's audience would have known right away that Jesus was speaking in metaphors, not passing along gardening advice.

His audience would have known that the particular metaphor Jesus was riffing on was related to some famous passages in the books of Daniel and Ezekiel. In the Book of Daniel, for instance, the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar has a dream involving a great tree where birds of the air make their nests. When he summons Daniel to interpret the dream, Daniel reveals that the tree is a metaphor for Nebuchadnezzar as the Emperor of a vast and mighty kingdom.

In the Book of Ezekiel, Pharaoh, the king of Egypt is compared to a great cedar tree that provides nesting places for all the birds of the heavens. Same metaphor, different ruler.

In still another passage in Ezekiel, God promises that God will plant Israel herself as a sprig on top of Mt. Zion, and that this sprig will turn into a lofty cedar in which every kind of bird will live.

In each one of these cases, the high and lofty tree is a great kingdom whose power and influence has spread so far that it provides refuge for surrounding nations.

So, now we know half the “joke” in Jesus’s parable. The kingdom of heaven is like something tiny like a mustard seed that grows into a vast kingdom incorporating many nations.

In this respect, Jesus’s teaching is in alignment with what is taught by our Jewish and Muslim friends. In the Jewish tradition, for instance, the Talmud (the central text of Rabbinic Judaism) teaches that every mitzvah – or, good deed offered daily in devotion to God – propagates other mitzvah, and every transgression propagates other transgressions. (Avot 4:2)

In Islam, the Qur’an states that those who spend their wealth in the way of Allah are like a grain of corn. That single grain grows seven ears, and each ear produces a hundred grains. (Surah Al-Baqarah; 2:261). Similarly, a saying attributed to Mohammed states, “Do not belittle any good deed, even meeting your brother with cheerful face.” (Sahih Muslim) Perhaps your cheerful greeting will propagate 7 x 100 cheerful interactions!

All this makes sense – that in God’s Realm, small acts can lead to great rewards. What does not make immediate sense is why Jesus specifically uses a mustard seed as the metaphor for this principle, claiming it turns into a great tree when mustard does not grow into trees. Why not use a cedar seed for the metaphor?

Clearly, Jesus wants us to ponder this parable for more than a minute. His parable is less like a joke than a riddle!

It’s like Jesus is asking, “What is among the smallest of things that defies all expectations and becomes the greatest of things?”

If we can solve this riddle, apparently, we come to know the secret of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Happily, Jesus provides us one small clue to the riddle elsewhere in Matthew’s Gospel – in another teaching about a mustard seed. Jesus teaches that when you have ... [something] ... the size of a mustard seed “you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.” (Matt 17:20) Do you remember what this “something” is?

Faith.

If you have *faith* the size of a mustard seed, you will move mountains and nothing will be impossible for you. Applying this insight to our parable, the secret power of the Kingdom of Heaven is that it can turn faith the size of a mustard seed into an impossibly high and lofty tree in which the birds of the air make their nests.

This is where most preachers say “Amen” and conclude their sermons. “Just have a little faith and you can do the impossible,” they say.

Well, I'm afraid that I'm not one of those preachers. I'm not one because this conclusion seems overly simple to me. If we end the sermon here, what message will you take home today? "Have a little faith and the impossible will happen"?

I don't know about you, but I can count hundreds, if not thousands of times when I have been faced with a challenge I thought was impossible and "had a little faith" ... only to find that faith did not produce the results I was intending.

If all it takes is "having a little faith" to make the impossible happen, the last three books I have written would have been New York Times bestsellers – or at least sold more than a few thousand copies. If all it takes is "having a little faith," the church I came to serve in my beloved Pacific Northwest would have been the greatest ministry experience of my life. Instead, I resigned after 19 months, shaking the dust off my feet as I left. If "a little faith" is all that is necessary, my eldest daughter's brain cancer would be long gone.

So, I'm not going to end this sermon with the line, "Just have a little faith and you will do the impossible." Because it's not true.

I do believe Jesus's message is absolutely true. It's just not true in this way.

What is the actual truth in Jesus's message about mustard-seed-sized faith?

It is said that during the persecutions of Emperor Licinius, forty Roman soldiers in the city of Sebasté – in what is now modern Turkey – were condemned to death for confessing their Christian faith. Death by freezing.

On a bitterly cold night, the soldiers were marched naked to the middle of a frozen pond and told that anyone who renounced their faith could jump in a hot bath being maintained in a hut at the edge of the pond. Otherwise, they would be kept there until they died. After an hour, one of the Christian soldiers couldn't stand it any longer. He renounced his faith and jumped in the bath, leaving 39 soldiers on the ice.

The next morning, however, 40 martyrs were counted on the ice, not 39. What happened? One of the Roman guards was so moved by what he witnessed out there on the ice that he took off his own clothes and joined them there.

What did the soldier witness? Since he's not alive to tell us, I'll tell you exactly what he witnessed! He witnessed faith the size of a mustard seed in those 39 soldiers.

What this soldier witnessed was 39 Christians who had no hope that if they just "have a little faith" they would be saved from a cruel, protracted, painful death. He witnessed 39 Christians who knew, in fact, that it was precisely because of their faith that they would die this way. Yet instead of renouncing their faith and living, they had discovered something so wonderful that no threat could convince them to let go of it.

I've never experienced a situation like these 39 Christians faced, but I'm pretty certain that when you are standing naked on a cold winter night on a frozen lake, with guards ensuring you cannot escape, you do not expect to experience anything wonderful. What you experience is not increased faith, but a crisis of faith.

Suddenly, you are faced with the realization that your beliefs in a God you have never seen, and a Christ you have never personally met, might just be a bunch of hooey. You realize that it makes no sense whatsoever to be standing out on the ice, about to die, all for beliefs that cannot be proved to be true. You realize that if you ever had imagined before accepting faith in Jesus that it would lead to your wife becoming a widow and your children becoming fatherless, you never would have accepted it to begin with.

All your great and mighty faith suddenly takes flight and leaves you in the cold and dark. You fall into despair, feeling utterly alone.

This is what each of those 39 Christians standing on the ice that night would have experienced - this or something quite close. And yet they stayed. They did not choose the warm bath. Why?

Have you ever experienced a time in your own life when all your faith and confidence in God and Jesus suddenly disappears and you find yourself standing before the Great Void, where all appears empty and black? Have you experienced a loss of hope that was so catastrophic that if you had any faith left at all it was telling you that God had singled you out for punishment, not blessing? Have you ever experienced an aloneness that digs down so deep into the marrow of your bones that you think you are forever lost?

Yet you sit here this morning – in church.

Perhaps you're here for the same reason I'm here. I'm here because I have experienced these feelings not just once, but several times in my life. I know what it is like to experience the floor of faith completely dropping out from under me and being plunged into deep darkness. I know what it is like to have a great and mighty belief system pulverized and ground down to the size of a mustard seed – and even to lose sight of the seed itself.

And yet, I'm here because I also know what it is like to discover a Presence moving in the darkness. A Presence that I neither conjured nor called for (because I was so far beyond calling). A Presence for which darkness is not dark, but is as light as day. (Psalm 139:12)

I'm here because I have discovered that when I had lost all sight of faith, God had not lost sight of me. I'm here because when I have felt completely unwanted and unloved, I have discovered a God who not only cares about me, but loves me beyond all imagining. A God who therefore moves me once again to love the life I have been given – and to love others again as well.

Just like gold is created in the universe only after a super-giant star runs out of fuel, collapses in on itself and explodes, this kind of mustard-seed faith that is connected to the Kingdom of Heaven on earth is produced in the very fires of hell. The hell we experience on earth, that is, when our faith is challenged so completely that it collapses, then blows apart. Just when we

thought there would be nothing left in the aftermath, we find this tiny little seed that is far more valuable than gold.

This mustard-seed faith is so valuable because it is the only kind of faith you can be absolutely sure you didn't make up in your head; the only kind of faith that you can be confident is connected to the Source of all faith. Most importantly, it is the only kind of faith you can count on showing up for you again in the future, should the hounds of hell ever be released on you again.

This kind of fire-born faith is also valuable because it strips away our fears. How can the fires of hell scare a person anymore when one has passed through them and emerged with the seed of heaven in their hands? A seed that produces exactly what the scriptures promise this kind of faith brings us: peace. "Peace that surpasses all understanding." (Philippians 4:7)

With such peace comes joy. Joy, because its source is in God, not you. Therefore, it does not depend on external circumstances to produce it, but arises from deep within you.

The Parable of the Mustard seed teaches us that the Kingdom of Heaven is like the tiny seed of faith that remains after all had been counted as lost. A seed that casts aside fear after fear as it continues to grow until finally it becomes a life-bearing tree that produces fruit and provides shelter; shelter not just for you, but for others. With this faith, there is no mountain that cannot be moved; no darkness that cannot be overcome; no peace or joy that cannot be experienced even when the world tries its best to take these very things away.

With all of the stress and anxiety in our world right now – including all the existential threats posed by the prospect of nuclear warfare, runaway climate change, and the unintended effects of emerging technologies – it's like we're all out there standing out there on the ice. Ice that has grown very thin – so thin that if the cold air doesn't do us in first, the water beneath us as we crash through will.

It seems to me that, given our precarious situation, we are faced with just two choices:

We can let go of faith entirely, making our way to the edge of the pond before the ice breaks. There, we can slip into the warm bath of denial, hoping this has all been a bad dream.

Or, we can hold firmly to this faith that has been tested and tempered by fire many times before, look each other in the eyes and say, "Friend, we're all on thin ice, so we may as well dance!"

I chose to dance.

How about you?