

## The Majesty of Little Things

Mark 4:30, 32

Linda and I were recently at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. While she was waiting in a line to check in, we decided to share “one of them fancy coffees” We’re from Texas. “Ya’ll call ‘em” “lattes.” In any event, I stepped into a coffee shop right off the lobby of the outpatient center and ordered at the left end of a short counter before stepping to my right to pay. A lady, thirty-ish, stepped up to the center of the counter. It wasn’t a big counter, and I felt a little crowded. I stepped back to pass behind her to the left end of the counter where my latte was being prepared, but she continued to take her half of the space out of the middle. She was in a world of her own. Finally, when she sensed that she was blocking the counter at both ends, she turned to me. Her face was beaming. Speaking of the whirring sound of the machine foaming the milk, she pointed to her ear and said, “I just got my hearing implants adjusted, and I was listening to the sound.”

Are we ever prone to loose sight of the majesty of little things as we impatiently wait for bigger things to come to us? All the whirring of a cappuccino machine ever communicated to me was that my coffee wasn’t done. I had to wait and I don’t like waiting.

When Jesus stepped into the world, He came to a people longing for something really big to happen, and they wanted it now. Israel bitterly resented the occupying presence of Rome. The people were always open to the idea that any provocative character might be their long-awaited *Messiah*. When Jesus arrived, preaching the coming of God’s kingdom and working miracles to boot, national enthusiasm was fueled. Crowds clamored to hear more about His news of the kingdom.

On this day, the crowd was so large that Jesus sat in a boat out on the lake so that He could address everyone. Then, He taught them about the kingdom in parables. Why parables?? He could have announced, “Here I am, *Messiah*. Follow Me!” but it was simply too early to be that direct. Jesus spoke in parables for two reasons. One was to avoid saying anything too incendiary in earshot of His foes. The other was to give any souls truly yearning for the rule of God something to stimulate their thinking to a plane higher than that of “rascally Romans and revolutions.”

<sup>30</sup>Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? <sup>31</sup>It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. <sup>32</sup>Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade.” – Mark 4:30-32

To a people looking for something really big and eye-popping to happen soon so as to kick off the reign of God, Jesus spoke of a mustard seed, something so small that it was barely visible.

### I. The Unlikely Conception of God’s Kingdom

#### A. God’s Affection for Unlikely Beginnings Is Apparent throughout Creation

The mustard seed is not the smallest seed known to us, but it likely was to that ancient audience. The mustard plant, however, could become a huge shrub. Some plants reached heights of over ten feet and spread out even wider. Jesus used the simile of a mustard seed, but He could have appealed to countless examples in creation for a pattern that greatness typically begins small.

A tiny seed grows into a huge shrub. An acorn produces a mighty oak. The most majestic eagle is hatched from an egg. A spark produces an inferno. The full-blown light of the brightest day begins with the tiniest glimpse of the dawn. Even the largest of men began life as an embryo. Until a couple of years ago, the only bridges where I had ever crossed the Mississippi River were at least a mile in length. But, when I drove over it only a few miles south of its source, I was surprised that it was even the same river. It seemed no bigger than our Conestoga Creek.

## **B. This Trend Was Apparent throughout Biblical History**

When God decided to build a nation, He began with one old man and his old wife. God promised to bring forth a great nation out from Abraham. He and Sarah were even older when they panicked and came up with that brainstorm of producing an heir by having Abraham father a child with a servant. But, God said, “That’s not the son I have in mind. The writer of Hebrews describes Abraham “as good as dead” when God finally gave him the child of the promise, Isaac.

In the days of Joseph, Abraham’s descendants went to Egypt. After four centuries, they had grown into a significant people numerically, but they were slaves. God brought the nation of Israel out of Egypt and led them to Canaan, but they were hardly an empire. The nation was led by a series of judges. One of the most famous of these judges was Gideon, the least member of the least family of the least clan of the not-much-happening tribe of Manasseh.

When God called Gideon to rescue Israel from the Midianites and their allies, the new leader raised a force of 32,000 men, which was still outmanned four-to one by the enemy. God dismissed every man who was afraid. Suddenly, the army dwindled to 10,000. They were now outmanned twelve-to-one, but God said, “That’s still too many.” Eventually, the army was whittled down to a tiny force of three-hundred. Tiny would prove more than adequate.

Even non-believers love the story of David and Goliath. A young shepherd takes out a Philistine giant. *ESPN* refers to “David *versus* Goliath” every time some overmatched opponent faces a major power in some sports competition. But, they miss the point of the story. The biblical account of David and Goliath was not about some far-fetched, upset victory by a little guy over a big guy. It is about the certain victory the little guy could count on because God had his back. Anywhere in God’s kingdom, tiny wields great power because the power of God is operative.

## **C. It Was No More Apparent than in the Early Christian Movement**

Consider the King Himself. It all began in a manger in tiny Bethlehem. As if that were not humble enough a beginning, Jesus grew up in and was known as a resident of Nazareth in Galilee. That was Hicksville in the minds of most Jews. Crowds flocked to receive healing from Jesus and to listen to His teachings, but as they got to know Him better, it became even more obvious that He was not cut from the right cloth to qualify as *Messiah*. He described Himself as gentle, meek and humble and, sure enough, that’s how He behaved. His background was not military. It was carpentry. His miracles were impressive, but He couldn’t hold a following.

The origins of His church were no more conspicuous. His closest disciples were unschooled and ordinary men. There was no obvious potential in them that suggested they had what it took to lead a major world movement. Only 120 people continued as Jesus’ disciples after He returned to Heaven. But, within weeks, the first church in Jerusalem numbered in the thousands and ultimately, at the end of the ages, the final tally will be a multitude beyond numbering.

## **D. It Is Apparent in the Very Nature of Faith**

How can anything of significance emerge from a faith that puts more stock in things that cannot be seen than in those things that can be seen? What benefit is there to a philosophy for living that defies the allure of might and wealth? What appeal is there to a movement that calls a man to live counter-culturally? In other words, when the things in which the world places the greatest value are not the same things that God calls us to value, we choose to embrace God's assessment of things. It's not easy to simply reverse the way you are accustomed to thinking. For example:

The *London Guardian* ran this headline about a theft trial: "Defendant Stole Bicycle to Get to Court on Time". In Olympia, Washington, a man on trial for assault secured a mistrial for the charge, but during a disagreement at the defense table as to how to proceed, slapped his lawyer.

It makes no sense to the world that the way to the fullest of all lives is a path of self-denial and living as a servant. Too many times, it appears as though it makes little sense to those who profess to trust Christ. How else are we to explain the allure of wealth and comfort that robs God of the best energies of His people and of the firstfruits of their resources? How else are we to understand the allure of bigness that finds churches looking for guidance to worldly corporations, worldly principles, worldly sensitivities, worldly methods and worldly measures of success?

I'm all for living in comfort if that's what the invisible dynamic of the kingdom produces for me. My duty, however, is faithfulness to kingdom living. I'm all for big churches if that's what the invisible dynamic of the kingdom produces, but our duty is to always be faithful to God's Word. All that is ultimately worth having is that which the life of the kingdom produces.

## **II. The Unrelenting Progression of God's Kingdom**

### **A. Ancient Audiences Needed to Hear These Words**

Obviously, that multitude gathered at the lake needed to hear this particular parable, because a time would come when each one of them would have to choose what they would do with this Jesus of Nazareth. He wasn't going to raise an army. He wasn't going to foment rebellion. He wasn't going to advocate tax revolt. He wasn't going to resort to political chicanery in order to advance His agenda. He would stick to this posture of meekness and gentleness right up to the day He would die on a Roman cross. Eventually, each one would be confronted with the gospel – that Jesus' death paid for their sins and that He had been raised back to life. Because sin and death had been defeated, a man could now inhabit God's holy, spiritual and eternal kingdom. Would that prove good enough news to cause them to surrender their earthly preconceptions?

The audience of Mark's gospel needed to hear this particular parable. We have no idea how many parables Jesus used in His ministry. We only know of the ones that the inspired authors recorded. We can assume that the circumstances surrounding the writing of a gospel factored into the parables featured. If Mark was written to Christians in Rome who were beginning to feel the heat of living out their faith in a hostile world, this parable would bring great comfort. They lived in the capital city of the greatest empire that had ever existed and now, the wrath of that empire was turning against them. They must have felt frightened. They must have felt helpless. They must have felt very small. What an encouragement to be reminded that as vulnerable as they must have felt, they were already a part of a vastly greater and more powerful kingdom.

## **B. We Still Need to Hear Them**

Things are often not as they appear to be. There was an old woman who crossed the Brazilian frontier every day on a motor scooter with a sack of sand behind her. The customs officer eventually became suspicious and inquired, "What have you got in that sack?" "Only sand, sir," she replied. The officer emptied the sack and, indeed, it contained nothing but sand. This went on for a month. One day, the officer said to the old woman, "I won't arrest you or say anything to the police, but just tell me: Are you smuggling or not?" "Yes," she answered truthfully. "Well, what are you smuggling?" he pressed her. With a smile, she replied, "Scooters."

Do you realize today that you are a part of a kingdom that should never have survived according to conventional wisdom? And, this is not just a kingdom that is coming, but one that is already great and mighty. This parable is not simply about "small becoming big." It is about that which is unlikely becoming great. That cannot be measured in crass terms of bigness and smallness. What can be any more remarkable than the certainty that a single seed sown in a sinner's heart will one day reproduce the character of Jesus? Often, we don't feel much like saints, but this parable reminds us that the progress of God's kingdom is certain, in the world and within us.

So what are the lessons of the ancient mustard seed today? It speaks to our discouragement. The work that God began in us, He will finish, even when we are discouraged by our own sins. It speaks to us when we become weary in the service of Jesus. Sometimes, you may feel as though you are spinning your wheels. A rebellious child has cast off the restraints of godliness. An unbelieving spouse or loved one simply seems disinterested in the things of God. All that you imagined that your efforts at the church should produce have not yet been realized. This parable reminds us to judge nothing prematurely. Even when progress seems imperceptible, the steady advance of the kingdom continues. Your duty is faithfulness. Your labors are never in vain.

## **III. The Unfathomable Dimension of God's Kingdom**

### **A. This Smallest of Seeds Becomes a Vast Kingdom**

... <sup>32</sup>Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade." - Mark 4:30-32

The Jews were accustomed to hearing great kingdoms described in terms of a tree. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon needed to be humbled. He concluded that his great kingdom was of his own doing. God sent him a dream that acknowledged the greatness of his kingdom, but it was followed by a prophecy that God would take his mind away until he repented and learned to give God the glory. The kingdom was described as a tree, "large and strong, with its top touching the sky, visible to the whole earth, <sup>21</sup>with beautiful leaves and abundant fruit, providing food for all, giving shelter to the beasts of the field, and having nesting places in its branches for the birds of the air." Of course, Daniel described the judgment of Nebuchadnezzar in terms of an axe. Simply put, God was going to take Nebuchadnezzar down a notch before he raised him back up.

Those who listened attentively to the parable of the Mustard Seed might figure out that Jesus was speaking of a vast kingdom that He would set up in spite of the fact that His methods would never prove to be conventionally "king-like." Still, His kingdom would prosper. In fact, one day all the kingdoms of this world will crumble. All notions of power and might will prove empty. Then, one kingdom will remain and that will be the eternal kingdom of God and of His Christ.

The spiritual and eternal kingdom of God first broke into the world when Jesus came and it continues to further break into this world with every passing hour. In the meantime, it also continues to progress in the hearts of God's people. And, even though there may be times when it seems that things are not progressing as they should, or they might even seem to be regressing, judge nothing before its time, for even the gates of Hell cannot deter the ultimate reign of God.

### **B. And, Yet, It Is a Kingdom like None Other**

Matthew and Luke each include this parable and actually refer to this huge garden herb as a "tree." They emphasize that the birds of the air nest in the branches. That may be intended to refer to the diversity of the kingdom of God. Various nations come in and find a place there. Traditions differ regarding how Christians learn to express their worship to God, but those differences do not disqualify any authentic believers from the kingdom. Matthew was written to Jews that needed to be reminded that the kingdom of *Messiah* is intended as a blessing to the whole world. Luke was written to Gentiles who needed to learn that God had a place for them.

Matthew and Luke needed to emphasize the kingdom aspect of the mustard plant (or tree) to their respective audiences. And, even though I developed this idea of a tree as a symbol of a nation, Mark never actually calls the mustard plant anything but what is, a "garden plant." And, he does not emphasize the birds perching on the branches so much as perching in the shade of the mustard plant. Is that significant? It could be. Once again, consider Mark's audience.

Perhaps, Mark did not intend to emphasize the "nation aspect" of God's kingdom so much as he intended to picture other aspects. What comes to mind when you think of coming into the shade? I think of restoration. I think of rest. I think of respite. I think of coolness. I think of healing. I think of just about everything that I might be yearning after if I found myself in a terrifying and hostile environment. Is it possible that Mark was endeavoring to depict the kingdom of God in such a way that hurting and frightened servants of Jesus could see themselves in the picture?

Whether facing the authentic peril of Rome or just the hostile cynicism of our own age, the kingdom of God is home to God's people. It is our refuge, our shade. See yourself in that picture.

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