

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(July 6, 2014)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon series: Story Time

Think Small

(Luke 13:18-21)

Study #1

Introduction: The quick and the big...

A few weeks ago I was having breakfast with a good friend who is a pastor at another church here in town. Out of the blue he asked me a question:

“Dave, out of all the kinds of messages you give, what do you enjoy preaching the most?”

It’s a good question, but it really didn’t take me that long to answer.

Now, the messages I preach are all from the Bible. I have spent my whole pastoral career plagiarizing, just quoting the Bible, because I sincerely believe that when we come together on Sundays, what we all need is not the words of a man, but God’s Word. So, I preach the Bible. And I love the Bible - the whole thing! - and have preached from much of it over the years I have been a pastor.

It’s been my privilege to have brought messages from the letters of the New Testament and the Psalms of the Old. I’ve spoken from the wisdom literature - Proverbs and Ecclesiastes and Job - and from the prophets. I’ve also preached from the narratives of the Old and New Testaments - Genesis, Joshua, Mark, John, and Acts

So, after a few seconds of reflection, I told my friend, *“Stories. I love to tell the stories of faith from the Bible.”*

But my love for story doesn’t mean that I’m restricted to the narrative portions of the Bible. That’s because it’s ALL story. Behind every proverb and command is a story. Behind every warning and prophecy is a story. Behind every poem and vision is a story.

In giving us the record of Scripture, God has tapped into a universal love of story.

Do you want to draw children in and get their attention? Start out a sentence with, *“Once upon a time...”* Successful TV shows and movies succeed because (with the exception of Seinfeld) they have compelling storylines.

When friends and family gather as you may have this weekend, they spend much of their time telling stories.

This morning, we’re going to listen to the master story-teller tell stories.

About parables...

Beginning today, we’re starting a new series of looks at the Bible. We are going to listen to the stories of Jesus. We call these stories parables¹ and the Gospels² record dozens of Jesus’ parables.

His parables are, without exception, interesting little stories. They tell of home life or the financial world or agriculture - stuff with which His first century audience was thoroughly familiar.

And, with a little background information thrown in, you and I can fully appreciate the parables, too, twenty centuries later.

¹ Our English word “*παραβολή*” is a transliteration of the Greek word “*parabole*” which simply means “to place beside, to cast alongside.” A parable, then, is a story that places one thing beside another for the purpose of teaching. It puts the known next to the unknown so that we may learn.

² The parables are all found in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). John includes no parables.

Children love Jesus' parables. Telling our children the parables is a parent's delight. Maybe your parents told you the parables when you were young. At some point along the way, as you grow up, you found that the parables grew up with you.

These little stories are more than bedtime stories that help put little ones to sleep. They are actually bugle calls that wake us up and call us to obedience. They fuel our spirits and enlarge our vision.

Parables are stories that put spiritual truth into everyday street language. They are both **windows** and **mirrors**. As mirrors, they help us see ourselves; as windows, they help us understand life and God.

It is important to know at the outset that parables can be tough to understand. But it's also important to know that Jesus intended them to be that way. He made them puzzling and mysterious on purpose. He meant for it to take work, real mental effort, to "get" His parables.

And for those who are willing to dig deep, the parables are gold mines of spiritual treasure. For those who won't ponder and mull and think and wrestle and meditate, the parables are stories, and nothing more.

Well, Jesus' parables are much more than just stories. They are stories with a point. And the points made by the parables are varied and compelling. When we grasp the point of any of Jesus' parables, it packs a wallop and it changes us, from the inside out.

Over the next few Sundays, we'll be looking at a few of Jesus' parables. And the parables we are going to be exploring are those with a certain kind of point.

About a certain family of parables...

The stories that we'll be opening are those that especially reveal Jesus' passion that people who don't know God would come to Him, trust Him, find life in Him.

These parables that we'll be seeing are those that reveal Jesus' heart for those who are outside looking in.

And these parables we are going to be looking at also reveal His heart that we who have come to Him, have trusted Him, and have found life in Him would invite those who are outside to come in and know Him, too.

Now today, we are going to look at two parables. They are among the shortest Jesus told (two verses apiece) and they are also among His better known parables.

We find them in Luke 13 and they both answer the question, "*What is 'THE KINGDOM OF GOD' like?*"³

About God's kingdom...

The kingdom of God is a huge theme and it is mentioned hundreds of times throughout the Bible.

And there is no need to be confused about the theme of God's kingdom, either. A kingdom is the realm over which a king rules and reigns. That's what a kingdom is.

The queen or king of England reigns over the subjects of the British Empire, wherever they may live. Same thing for other countries ruled by a monarch like Belgium, Denmark, Japan, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Sweden (among others).

So, the kingdom of God is the realm over which God rules and reigns. In the biggest most overarching sense, the whole world is under the rule and reign of God. He is the Sovereign over everything. He is the KING of Kings.

But in both the Old and New Testaments there is a more particular sense in which God's kingdom is that portion of humanity over which God is actively ruling and reigning.

In the Old Testament, God's kingdom was localized in the nation of Israel. God reigned over His people. He was their King even when Israel had its own human king. A big part of Israel's kingdom stewardship was to expand and export God's reign to the rest of the world.

³ Also Matthew 13 and (for one of them), Mark 4.

In these New Testament times, God's kingdom is localized in the church. He reigns in our church and in every other church. And as it had been Israel's privilege to expand God's reign throughout the earth, so today, God has given us the same assignment.

We "flesh out" God's reign as we worship Him, as we build each other up, and as we shine for Him in the world.

Today we listen as Jesus speaks about God's kingdom and its expansion. He is talking to an audience made up of the twelve apostles, some curious outsiders, and maybe a few enemies.

I think it is likely that He was speaking in a Jewish synagogue, on the Sabbath day, after having just healed a woman who had suffered from an eighteen years long sickness caused by an unclean spirit.⁴

Let's listen to the parable. Or, as our memory verse for July has it, *[Matthew 13:9] "He who has ears, let him hear."*

A Parable of Surprising Growth (Luke 13:18-19)

[18] So He was saying, "What is the kingdom of God like, and to what shall I compare it? [19] "It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and threw into his own garden; and it grew and became a tree, and THE BIRDS OF THE AIR NESTED IN ITS BRANCHES."

The Parable as Story

The gardener

The elements of this parable are simple. There is a gardener and he throws mustard plant seeds into his garden plot.

Normally, mustard seeds were planted in open fields. But Jesus has this guy planting mustard in his family garden. His only role in the parable is to set things in motion by sowing seed.

⁴ Luke's introduction differs from that in Matthew and is close to that found in Mark.

And then, of course, there is the seed. It is the seed of a mustard plant.

The mustard seed and plant

When we read this parable in Matthew and Mark, Jesus makes reference to the mustard seed being very, very small.⁵ Luke doesn't call attention to the size of the seed, but in the ancient world it was a proverb that something small was "*as small as a mustard seed.*"

The mustard seed is very small. But the mustard plant grows to be something substantial.

The mustard plant grows to be a bush, usually about four feet tall. But in the Middle East it can grow to heights of 9-10 feet. It's not a towering oak tree, but Jesus wasn't at all off the mark to refer to it as a tree.

And then there are the birds.

The birds

Birds aren't generally appreciated in gardens. (At this very moment birds are probably eating the tomatoes in my garden.) Here, though, they are welcomed to perch on the branches of the mustard tree, which holds them with no problem.

And that's the story. But it's more than a story. According to Jesus, the story of the mustard's seed growth from tiny to tall is a sermon about the expansion of the kingdom of God.

The Parable as Sermon

The kingdom of God ends BIG!

The end of the story is that the kingdom of God ends up BIG. The image that gets that idea across is that of a tree big enough to support and to shade and to house birds.

⁵ Even with Matthew's and Mark's comments, I don't think it is necessary to say that Jesus' was declaring that the mustard seed is the smallest seed of all the plants in the world.

Judaism frequently imagined the growth of a kingdom by means of a tree. Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian kingdom was pictured as a towering tree (Daniel 4). Ezekiel pictured Assyria as a tall cedar (Ezekiel 31). The kingdom of God is depicted as a huge tree in Psalm 80.

So it's not surprising that Jesus wants us to think of God's kingdom as something big. But the point of the parable is really not how big God's kingdom gets. The point is how small it is when it begins.

The kingdom of God starts SMALL

The mustard seed is of insignificant size when compared to most of the seeds I plant in my garden. Bean and okra and squash seeds are hundreds of times bigger than a mustard seed. But the mustard plant ends up being hundreds of times bigger than a pole bean plant.

God's kingdom work begins small, puny, seemingly insignificant, and it grows surprisingly large.

Who would have ever thought, looking at the mustard seed, that it would grow to be a tree of such size and substance?⁶

That is the way of the expansion of the kingdom of God. You and I could play the "*Who would have ever thought*" game all day long.

Who would have ever thought...

The story of Jesus

Who would have ever thought that Jesus of Nazareth would end up being the most significant Person to have ever lived?

Think about it.

He grew up in the despised, backwoods province of Galilee and didn't appear in public until age thirty. He taught for about three years, mostly in the rural villages of an oppressed people.

Only on rare occasions did He go to the big city of Jerusalem and He never went to the larger Roman cities of Tiberias or Sepphoris, where most people went who wanted to make names for themselves.

He performed miracles, but again, mostly in out-of-the-way villages. He generally shunned the spotlight. He made a few converts, most of whom were poor and uneducated and very few of whom were wealthy or well-connected.

He made enemies of the rich and powerful, was arrested, condemned, and then died the shameful death of crucifixion, having been rejected by His own people.

And today, hundreds of millions of people around the world give their whole-hearted allegiance to Jesus, the living Lord.

Anyone observing the relatively obscure life of Jesus, who knew His rag-tag band of disciples, and who had seen His puny beginnings, would have never dreamed that they were seeing the start of something big.

But this "who would have ever thought" thing is actually the pattern of God's kingdom work.

The pattern of God's plan throughout Scripture

Who would have ever thought that out of the genealogy of the despised Moabite people would come a woman, Ruth, who would marry a Jew named Boaz and that they would produce a son who would be in the line of King David?

Who would have ever thought that God would bring about a great Jewish victory under the leadership of General Gideon but only AFTER Gideon's army had been reduced from 22,000 to 300 soldiers?

Who would have ever thought, after denying Jesus three times, that less than two months later, Simon Peter would become a bold spokesman for Jesus and that God's kingdom would expand exponentially on the Day of Pentecost through Peter's testimony?

⁶ Did Jesus mean to point to Gentiles finding rest in the mustard plant's branches?

And on and on we could go, multiplying stories like these. The point of the parable of the mustard seed is that God takes the small and apparently insignificant and turns it into something weighty.

An act may seem trivial and mundane, but God may just use that act to advance His kingdom. A person may have an entirely inauspicious start, but by God's grace, may have a great and glorious God-honoring end.

You!!

Who would have ever thought that your daily prayers for your neighbors would result in opportunities to share Jesus with them?

Who would have ever thought that your love for your wife or your love for your husband would speak volumes to them about God's love and that God would open their heart to His grace through your love?

Who would have ever thought that your regular time in Scripture would produce character traits that honor Jesus?

Who would have ever thought that leading your children in the ways of Jesus would result in two or three or more generations of Christ-followers in your family tree?

Who would have ever thought that your painful, wounded, checkered past would be exactly what God would use to draw attention to His redemptive ways?

Don't worry about the smallness of your gesture. God will grow your mustard seed sized act of love or your quiet word about Jesus into something glorious. That's His kingdom way and that's the parable of the mustard seed.

And then, immediately after that story, Jesus told another parable with a similar, but slightly different point.

That first story highlighted the surprising size God's kingdom will attain despite its small beginnings. This second parable emphasizes the surprising impact God's kingdom will have, despite its unobtrusive, non-flashy style.

Again, [Matthew 13:9] "*He who has ears, let him hear.*"

A Parable of Unobtrusive Impact (13:20-21)

[20] *And again He said, "To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? [21] "It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened."*

The Parable as Story

The woman

In the first parable a man sowed the seed of a mustard plant. In this one, a woman takes leaven and puts it in a large lump of unleavened dough.

The woman fulfills the same function as the man in the first parable. She's not the point of the story. She appears simply to apply the leaven.

Then, there is the flour in which she "hid" the leaven.

The flour

It turns out that she's working with a pretty big lump of dough. Sources that I checked said that it would have been enough to have fed over one hundred people.⁷

But, as it sat there, that lump wasn't exactly mouth-watering. It certainly wasn't fork-ready. It just sat there. It needed help. It needed leaven.

The leaven

There are several leavening agents around - biological, chemical and even mechanical. The most common, though, is baker's yeast, which is added to an unleavened lump of dough to start off the process of fermentation.

⁷ A "peck" is a dry measure equaling about eight quarts, thus she was dealing with 24 quarts of doughy material.

The cook kneads the dough and works the leaven into the lump - and then leaves the leaven to do its work.

Nobody sees the leaven at work. It works invisibly, within the lump. In the ancient world a woman would prepare the dough late in the day and leave the leavening bread untouched and unobserved overnight. Then, in the morning - voila! - she had bread!

Leaven had permeated the lump of dough and had impacted everything with which it had come into contact, unobserved and invisibly.

Jesus says that the kingdom of God is like leaven as it works its way into a lump of dough.

Now, in lots of places in the Bible, leaven is used as a symbol of evil and sin. It pictures how sin wiggles its way into our lives and poisons everything it touches.

That is not the point here. Here, Jesus is using the work of leaven positively to show the unobtrusive advance of God's kingdom as it makes impact while it permeates families and circles of friends and whole societies.

The Parable as Sermon

Kingdom progress is unobtrusive

Leaven works silently and invisibly. It doesn't draw attention to itself. It works behind the scenes, in the shadows.

And that, by and large, is how God's kingdom works and how it advances.

I'm grateful to the Billy Grahams and the Luis Palaus of the world. I really am. God has used large scale evangelism wonderfully through the centuries.

I'm grateful for large conferences, like the Challenge conference where our young people are this week in Kansas City and the conferences I've attended and that you've attended where we stand on the mountain-top with others and worship God as one.

I'm grateful for large gatherings of Christians on Sunday mornings - and large is relative. In San Antonio, "large" is thousands, but in many places "large" is hundreds. And in some places "large" is dozens. It's great when large numbers come together to learn and to be inspired.

But the reality is that most of the soul-shaking, life-changing kingdom of God work done in people's hearts is done small. He breaks through when a few friends get real with each other, or in a one-on-one setting, or when He touches a soul, personally, in a quiet moment of prayer and reflection.

This, too, is the pattern of God's kingdom advance. Quiet. Unflashy.

Jesus was born in an obscure Bethlehem stable and He died on a dark Friday afternoon. God prefers to advance His kingdom unobtrusively, away from the spotlight.

Behind those who lead from up front, God works behind the scenes. He works behind those who work behind the scenes. He even works behind those who work behind those who work behind the scenes.

He is the One who leavens conversations with truth. He is the One who leavens acts of love with grace. He leavens gifts of mercy performed in His name so that, at the end of the day, a soul is touched.

The Kingdom of God advances silently. But its progress is unmistakable and undeniable.

Kingdom's impact is undeniable

At the end of time, the whole lump will be leavened and God will reign as recognized king over all. In the end, God wins.

That's part of the message of the parable of the leaven. But I think Jesus also wants us to take away from this little parable a confidence that when we leaven our world with the Gospel, we are dealing with something powerful.

Just like leaven is a change agent when kneaded into a lump of unleavened dough, so the Gospel is a change agent when we knead it into the lives of those we love.

The Apostle Paul understood this, which is how he was able to write to the church at Corinth, *[2 Corinthians 2:14] But thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. [15] For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; [16] to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life.*

The leaven we bring to our world is the message that Jesus saves. It is the Gospel of Christ. It is the whole word of God.

I can't guarantee that your every effort to evangelize will result in a friend's salvation, and neither would Jesus. I can assure you that when you spread the leaven of the Gospel, there will be an impact for God, for good.

Rest in that. Trust that. Your faithful leavening almost certainly won't have the exact impact you imagine. But it will have an impact. It won't just sit there.

God will use your leavening work in ways you would never have dreamed to change you, to change your friend, to arouse opposition, to effect hardening, to bring about softening. That's what leaven does.

Conclusion:

So, what are the things that get noticed today? The quick and the big.

We reserve headlines for the fast-growing business and the flashy A-list star, the stock that rises like a meteor and the "it's all about me" sports star.

The kingdoms of this world have always applauded the splashy, flashy kick-off. Grand openings and initial public offerings and spectacular launches are the stock in trade of business today.

But the wisdom of God has always known better than to put confidence in a successful launch. Ecclesiastes says, *[7:8] The end of a matter is better than its beginning.* (After all, what project ever began with more promise than the Tower of Babel? And THAT didn't end all that well, did it...?)

The biggest news out there is the advance of God's kingdom. It doesn't lead on anybody's newsfeed - now. It will one day, but it doesn't now. And the funny thing, as we've seen today, is that Jesus meant for it to be that way.

Mustard seed investments in relationships will often produce beyond anything you ever imagined. Behind the scenes leavening with love and truth and prayer may well be what God uses to bring about revival, overnight, while no one is watching.

The kingdom of God may well have a puny beginning. But it works behind the scenes, slowly, unobtrusively - and has a glorious end.

So think small, friends. God will take your small service/gift/prayer and use it to advance His kingdom reign and rule.